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MINISTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
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MEMBER FOR MOLONGLO

Ms Amanda Bresnan
Chair
Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Ms Bresnan

I am advised the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs is conducting an *Inquiry into School Closures and Reform of the ACT Education System*.

I have attached the ACT Government's submission to this inquiry.

Yours sincerely

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Minister for Education and Training

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ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

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**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

ACT GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION

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

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

ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs

Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system

ACT Government Submission

Introduction

In 2006 the ACT Government launched *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools*, the largest reform process of ACT public education since self-government. \$350 million was provided for building new schools and upgrading all existing public schools – the largest ever investment in ACT public education. The ongoing renewal process, backed by record levels of investments by the Government in successive budgets, is ensuring the ACT can continue to build a world-class education system to prepare ACT students for the future.

While students in ACT public schools perform strongly by national and international standards, there is more we can do. The substantial investments and reforms under *Towards 2020* are aimed at maintaining and improving the ACT's current high education standards and giving every young Canberran the opportunity to access consistently high-quality learning environments in order to reach their educational potential.

The numerous strategic and complementary reform initiatives include:

- a system-wide professional development initiative to improve teacher quality
- the introduction of a 21st century curriculum framework
- a focus on school standards
- stronger support for students with a disability
- the establishment of new schools in population growth areas and rationalisation in areas where consolidation of older schools into one, more contemporary facility or into nearby existing facilities is beneficial
- extensive renewal of infrastructure and major capital upgrades in existing schools
- nation-leading IT upgrades including fibre optic cabling to all public schools
- increased access to quality preschool education
- highly innovative, best-practice early childhood schools
- enhanced assistance to students with special learning social needs and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

These reforms required some school closures and amalgamations, changed administrative arrangements and extensive regional planning to ensure all children and young people, regardless of their background and circumstances, have access to the type of schooling that will best meet their

developmental, social and educational needs and allow them to enjoy a rewarding experience at school.

1. The ACT Government's *Towards 2020* policy

The overarching objective of the ACT Government's ongoing *Towards 2020* policy initiative is renewal and reform of the ACT public education system. The Government identified that: to ensure the ongoing sustainability, responsiveness and the high quality of the public education system into the future; to ensure public education continued to be a real choice for students and their families; and to provide every student attending public schools with the opportunity to experience successful learning; renewal, reform and some rationalisation was needed.

To achieve this, the initiative considered educational planning and provision within and across eight geographic and population regions of the ACT. This approach sought to ensure a range of educational settings, learning opportunities and strong life pathways toward further studies and rewarding careers are available for students within each region.

The 2006 *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools* consultation document outlining the proposal is at [Attachment A](#).

The reforms and the renewal programs, at systemic and regional levels, involved:

- the establishment of new schools with 21st century teaching and learning facilities to replace existing schools with ageing infrastructure or to meet demand in areas of growth
- the closure or amalgamation of some schools to better meet the demographic, educational and social needs of the ACT community.
- the strengthening of educational networks that will add value to the educational experience for staff, students and their families, and strengthen existing partnerships with universities, Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT), businesses, industry and communities.

The capital funding initiative announced in the 2006-07 Budget to 'kick start:

- the *Towards 2020* reform programs provided \$90 million for school infrastructure upgrades to enhance existing learning environments for students and teachers
- \$67 million to build two new schools
- \$20 million for the provision of information technology in schools to give students access to the latest IT to enhance their learning; and an additional \$3 million per annum to the school maintenance program to maintain and upgrade facilities.

The 2006-07 ACT Budget papers are at [Attachment B](#).

As a result of these initiatives, students and their families now have access to: preschool programs in every primary school; early childhood schools; comprehensive primary schools and high schools; before and after school

care programs; opportunities for continuity of schooling from preschool to year 10 in the one setting; middle schooling programs; specialist secondary programs, support units in mainstream schools and special schools for students with a disability; alternative settings for students with particular social and learning needs; vocational training programs; senior secondary colleges; and advanced programs at tertiary level.

1.1 Demographic factors influencing regional planning

Demographic factors were given considerable weight in planning for the future delivery of educational services at a regional level. In 2008, the ABS reported that in terms of population change demonstrated between the 2001 and 2006 Censuses:

The areas of Canberra with the greatest population growth were the newer, outer suburbs of Amaroo, Gungahlin and Harrison in the Gungahlin area; Conder and Greenway in Tuggeranong. In the inner city area, Braddon and Acton had population growth of around 25% while for Turner it was over 50%. Barton and Kingston in inner South Canberra also experienced high population growth. Most of the increases in Braddon, Turner, Barton and Kingston were due to multi-unit developments where there was also a high proportion of people living alone and couples without children.

Some population declines were also recorded in the same broad areas. These suburbs included Melba and Evatt in Belconnen; Richardson and Chisholm in Tuggeranong; and Rivett and Holder in the Weston Creek-Stromlo area. The declines in these suburbs were around -4% and -5%.

In 2006 the ABS also reported in their publication *Australian Capital Territory in Focus, 2006* that the ACT recorded the lowest population growth (0.3%) in 2004-05 of the states and territories. *The Tuggeranong SSD¹ experienced the largest population loss (down 770 people) in the year to June 2005, followed by the Belconnen SSD (down 190 people).*

The ABS publications referred to above are at Attachment C.

Gungahlin clearly continues to be the most rapidly growing region with the highest proportion of children aged 0-14. As reported by the ABS, in 2006: *Children aged 0-4 years were most likely to live in the newer suburbs of Canberra, which have undergone considerable growth in the past decade. The highest concentration occurred in the Gungahlin suburb of Amaroo (12.6%), with other suburbs in the area (Gungahlin, Harrison, Ngannawal) also recording over 10% of their populations aged under 5 years.*

Belconnen in contrast has recorded slowly declining school enrolments over the last five to seven years in all but the western part of the region around Dunlop and Fraser. The ABS reported that *the highest proportion of older people in 2006 was Page, in Belconnen, at 16.3%, with three large retirement and nursing homes impacting on this figure.* In 2006 Belconnen had 20

¹ Statistical subdivision

primary schools serving the area, the majority averaging less than 60% of their capacity being utilised and exhibiting ageing infrastructure. Data in 2006 indicated that students in one suburb travelled to 30 different ACT public schools, a situation which also reflected the workplace locations and care arrangements of many families. Revitalisation of public education in this region is providing much greater opportunities for students to access contemporary education services.

In contrast to Belconnen, the central areas of Canberra have experienced a growth in population as people, often young professionals, move into the area in townhouse and apartments to be closer to the amenities of the city centre and often to their workplace. While many schools are at capacity, this in great part reflects the high proportion of students who travel into the area, in particular to access specialist secondary programs such as those at Lyneham and Alfred Deakin High Schools.

In Weston Creek, the changing demographic has had a significant impact on once thriving schools in every suburb that catered for a young population. The firestorm of 2003 also resulted in many families moving out of the affected suburbs. While new homes have been built in recent times, they are often inhabited by much smaller family units. In 2006, five primary schools with a capacity of over 1600 were serving a predicted school-age population of around 1000. The ABS reported however, that based on the 2006 Census data, one area *was recording high growth in the proportion of young children ... the suburb of Duffy (7.6% in 2006 compared with 5.6% in 2001)*. Duffy Primary School is well placed and has the capacity to absorb any future growth in enrolments, including from the closest part of Molongolo.

From the mid 1970s schools opened in the growing region of Tuggeranong to meet the needs of the many young families settling in the valley. The 1996 Census recorded that 12.6% of Tuggeranong residents were less than five years of age. Many of these young people are now approaching their senior secondary years. Population growth and consequently school enrolments have steadily declined in recent years and this pattern is expected to continue for some time into the future. The ABS reported from the 2006 Census data that while the suburbs of Banks and Conder still had high proportions of young children, the *largest decrease in population during 2004-05 occurred in the SLA² of Kambah*, a suburb which was served by four primary schools at the time, followed by Conder and Wanniasa.

1.2 Other factors influencing regional planning

In developing the renewal and reform process, many factors were considered other than demographic data, school enrolment trends, projected enrolments, and the demand for places in each school from students residing in and outside the local enrolment area. Other important considerations included: the nature of the educational provision in each school and in each region; the options available for creating access to a greater range of curriculum offerings; the need for stronger pathways from preschool through to year 12;

² Statistical Local Area

and the capacity or potential of schools to serve the region by offering a range of more contemporary programs in a different educational configuration. This meant the location of each school, the number of schools within each region, and the proximity of more specialised facilities to other schooling options, also had to be considered.

Financial factors also influenced renewal planning, of most significance were:

- the cost of operating each school compared to other ACT schools of similar size and configuration, in particular schools with under-utilised capacity
- the cost of educating a child in a particular school setting
- the cost of maintaining and upgrading older buildings to both minimum and modern educational standards
- the average cost to the ACT taxpayer for educating a student in the ACT compared to other jurisdictions.

Tables illustrating these costs and projected savings are at Attachment D.

Social and environmental factors also needed to be considered. It has been evident for some time that fewer children are walking to their local school and that the neighbourhood school is no longer the first choice for many families. In 2006, over 40% of public school students were not attending their local priority enrolment area (PEA) school. From survey and research evidence and anecdotal reports, we know that parents consider many factors when it comes to schooling choices. Some of the key considerations are quality of education, school culture and peer relationships. Other considerations include: school location; hours of employment of parents and the location of their workplace; availability of before and after school care arrangements; availability of specialist or highly acclaimed extension, sporting or arts programs; and transport arrangements.

1.3 Configuration of school environments

With a reform focused firmly on maintaining excellence in the public school system and on giving ACT students access to a greater range of high quality public schools, it has been essential that new and continuing schooling models are supported by sound educational research. Research by reputable national and international education experts and researchers was considered during the reform planning process - in particular research around early childhood education, middle schooling and senior schooling models, and size and configuration of schools. The Department of Education and Training (the Department) also posted a range of these education papers on the *Towards 2020* website during the consultation period in 2006.

A selection of papers is available at Attachment E.

To ensure greater community access to this latest research, during this period the Department held its first educational seminar series for parents and other community members. The seminars were designed to investigate important educational issues that influence the way public education is delivered into the

future and to inform the *Towards 2020* consultations. Guest speakers included Dr Allison Elliott, who was Research Director Early Childhood education at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) at the time on early childhood education and Dr Lindsay Connors on the future of public schools. The education seminar series continued into 2007 and 2008.

Outlines of the 2006 and 2007 seminar series are at Attachment F.

After careful consideration of feedback from the community following the extensive consultation process in 2006, and with regard to the key issues from the education literature, the Minister for Education and Training reduced the range of models originally described in the *Towards 2020* proposal. The most common schooling models that would continue to be available across the ACT were P-6, P-10, 7-10 and 11-12. In addition, the Government introduced a middle schooling program at Stromlo High School (6-10) in 2007, a 7-12 secondary school (Melba-Copland Secondary School) on a dual campus in 2008, a P-10 school (Caroline Chisholm School) on a dual campus linking the existing high school and primary school in 2008 and four new early childhood schools (P-2) this year.

Integration of preschools with primary schools

There was strong community and professional support expressed during the consultation process for the amalgamation of preschools with primary schools. Advantages seen were opportunities for enhanced continuity of early learning for young children, greater professional and administrative and resource support for preschools, and enhanced career paths for staff. Amalgamation occurred from the beginning of 2008 and the practical aspects of operating preschools as part of primary schools were worked through with local preschool community members and school principals during the first year of operation.

Early childhood schools (preschool - year 2)

Across the world there continues to be increasing recognition and research evidence that validates the importance of early childhood development in setting the foundation for learning, behaviour and health through the school years and into adult life.

An example is the *Toronto (Canada) First Duty Program* which is at Attachment G.

The Government has recognised that investment in early intervention and high quality education in the early years will have lasting effects on a child's social, emotional and intellectual development. In recent years, the ACT Government has also made a significant investment to reduce class sizes in the early years of schooling. The four new early childhood schools will complement the long-established O'Connor Cooperative School and learn much from its highly regarded programs.

With the preschool programs fully integrated within the school facility, four years of continuous learning is now provided in the one setting during the vital

early years of learning and development. When the child care programs commence operation in each of the four new early childhood schools this year, and the schools are linked with before and after school care programs, they will further assist families to manage the demands of life in the 21st century by providing a stable environment for young children.

Over time, there will also be opportunities for the early childhood schools to establish linkages with early childhood services provided by other agencies and to co-locate some of these in the P-2 schools. By providing integrated education, health and family support services, there is a greater opportunity for early identification of learning needs, intervention and prevention to enable students to achieve their full potential. These new early childhood schools will provide a full range of services for families and the community from birth to age 8.

Refer to Attachment H for a selection of policy papers, research papers and promotional brochures for the P-2 schools.

Primary schools (preschool - year 6)

Traditional primary school models have provided strong education programs for students during the early and later childhood years for more than 100 years. With preschools linked to the primary school years, children experience a seamless transition from home to school supported by a strong sense of community and belonging and where early interventions, if necessary, are most constructive.

Primary schools provide strong educational programs for students during the early and later childhood years. Within a stable home-room environment one teacher generally takes responsibility for all key learning areas and the educational outcomes of one class of children. Each of the eight regions continues to offer accessible primary schools that are being progressively refurbished and modernised.

Middle schooling (middle years programs – years 5/6 – year 8)

Middle schooling programs focus on the specific developmental and learning needs of young adolescent students. They enable individual teachers to spend more time and establish closer relationships with the same groups of students, enabling more personalised learning programs and stronger pastoral care programs. Middle years programs aim to offer curriculum and provide teaching and learning strategies that reflect and incorporate an understanding of young adolescents and provide a connectedness with the world and values of these young people at this important stage of their lives. Recent research indicates that with a strong focus on both academic rigour and student welfare, many students clearly benefit from these settings. Middle schooling programs are available in regions in response to community feedback across a range of school settings.

Primary/middle/high schools (P-10 schools)

P-10 schools provide students with a continuous progression through school from preschool to Year 10. They aim for enhanced pastoral care provided by

teachers who know students across the school and from older students who work with and support younger students. They also provide opportunities for the schools to develop formal middle years' programs. Another benefit is the wider professional development opportunities available for staff. These schools are also very efficient, with less administrative overheads than separate schools. Student benefits include greater access for students of all ages to specialist teaching spaces such as technology areas, science facilities and creative arts areas. This enables enhanced curriculum choices and a learning environment that promotes a richer educational provision. The P-10 model results in consistency in values and expectations from the start of preschool through to the completion of the high school years. Gold Creek School, and subsequently Amaroo School, have led the way, locally and nationally, with their research-based structures and approaches to curriculum delivery. P-10 schools are now operating in five regions in the ACT.

High schools (year 7 – 10)

High schools provide a comprehensive range of programs, which offer all students, in addition to a core curriculum, a broad range of learning opportunities, suited to the needs and interests of the individual. Teachers encourage students to make choices that will broaden their interests and skills. Most high schools offer students opportunities for some curriculum specialisation in Years 9 and 10 in preparing them for secondary college, future study or the workforce. Some high schools will offer a stronger focus in particular areas of the curriculum such as information technologies, the arts and vocational studies, and all offer enrichment or extension programs. Some high schools (e.g. Stromlo High School, Gold Creek and Amaroo Schools) also have the capacity to enrol students into their middle schooling program at Year 6 level. Over 40 students have enrolled in Stromlo's Year 6 program in 2009.

In recognition of the particular developmental, social and welfare needs of adolescent students, the Government has made a significant investment in pastoral care programs, enabling all ACT public high schools with Years 7-10 cohorts to employ a dedicated Pastoral Care Coordinator at executive teacher level.

Secondary school (year 7-12)

The *Report of the Review of Government Secondary Colleges in the ACT (Attachment I)* released by the Government in January 2006 examined the Year 7-12 secondary schools model. Evidence indicated the major perceived strengths of the traditional Year 7-12 high school model was greater continuity of curriculum through the secondary years, greater breadth of curriculum and facilities within the school, and strong pastoral care and community support. Evidence gathered by the Review also suggested that where parents choose to enrol their child in a non-government 7-12 secondary school, they are persuaded at least in part by the above considerations. As an outcome of a level of community support for the proposal to amalgamate Melba High School and Copland College, the Minister made a decision to proceed with the establishment of a 7-12 public school. The Melba Copland Secondary

School commenced operation in 2008, retaining their existing campuses and the integrity of the senior college programs offered at Copland.

Senior secondary colleges (year 11-12)

The *Report of the Review of Government Secondary Colleges* also found the essential integrity of the current model of separated provision for Years 11 and 12 should continue to be available. Senior colleges have become associated with the unique identity of educational provision in the ACT and have been a predominant feature of the ACT public school system for the past 30 years. Colleges provide students with an adult environment that is age appropriate to students. Students are accorded high levels of trust and can develop skills for independent decision-making and self-responsibility. Teachers focus strongly on the content of their disciplines and, with a large cohort of students across only two years of schooling, colleges can offer a vast range of courses.

Senior secondary colleges aim to develop each student's sense of responsibility for self and others, their independence and their skills in decision-making. During the consultation around the future for Dickson College, the community clearly indicated its preference to retain the discrete Year 11-12 college model as a quality schooling choice for students. In response to feedback, the Minister decided to retain Dickson College and also ensure that on the Copland campus of the amalgamated Melba Copland Secondary School, a full range of accredited and tertiary courses similar to those offered in the senior secondary colleges would continue to be offered.

Schools with specialist vocational programs

One of the keys to engaging every young adult in ongoing education is diversity of curriculum. Greater provision of vocational education and training (VET) in schools offers students practical learning, introduces them to the world of work and develops employability skills. The establishment of a designated VET provision linked to business, employers and the CIT provides a real pathway for many of the 70% of students who are not looking to university as their immediate post school destination. All public senior secondary colleges are Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and offer a range of VET courses. The ACT Government has continued to deliver funded budget initiatives in school-based training and apprenticeship programs.

Special schools and special units

The ACT has maintained its current special school provision. The four highly regarded special schools (Cranleigh, Malkara, Black Mountain and The Woden School) will continue to provide more intensive educational learning environments for students with a significant level of disability and high support needs. Support classes and units in mainstream schools also continue to be part of the ACT public school landscape. These small classes are established in response to identified need and also provide more intensive, specialised programs for students with a disability and higher support needs.

1.4 Reorganisation of the ACT school system thus far

In terms of major structural changes to the configuration of the school system, the reform process announced by the Minister for Education and Training on 13 December 2006 is almost complete.

Following the community consultation process in 2006, the Minister decided that of the 20 preschools considered for possible closure, nine would close:

- three closed at the end of 2006 (McKellar, Rivett and The Causeway)
- three at the end of 2007 (Cook, Page and Macarthur)
- two at the end of 2008 (Holt and Higgins, which were replaced by the new facility at Kingsford Smith)
- at the end of 2010, Village Creek preschool will close and be replaced by a new preschool facility at the Tuggeranong P-10 school to open in 2011.

Of the 17 schools under consideration for closure, the Minister decided 12 would close:

- seven at the end of 2006 (Flynn, Hall, Melrose, Mt Neighbour, Rivett, Tharwa and Weston primary schools)
- three at the end of 2007 (Village Creek and Cook primary schools, and Kambah High School, which will be replaced by the new school on the same site)
- two at the end of 2008 (Holt and Higgins primary schools, which were replaced by the new facility at Kingsford Smith). Community consultation is currently occurring around the proposed closure of Urambi Primary School at the end of 2010 prior to the opening of the new Tuggeranong school being built on adjacent land.

All school amalgamations announced, (each preschool with a primary school or P-10 school, Melba High School with Copland College, Chisholm Preschool and Primary School with Caroline Chisholm High School), were successfully implemented for the commencement of the 2008 school year.

For the 2007 school year the additional year level at Stromlo High School (Year 6) started operation, and for 2008, the Hawker Collegiate was established and the new Harrison Primary School commenced operation.

From the start of the 2009 school year, the four new early childhood schools (Isabella Plains, Lyons, Narrabundah and Southern Cross) and the new school in west Belconnen (Kingsford Smith) commenced operation.

Also announced was a senior secondary college for Gungahlin, which will open in the later part of 2010 and a new P-10 school in Tuggeranong on the Kambah High site to open in 2011.

A summary of the Minister's decisions and the package of reforms announced in December 2006 is at [Attachment J](#).

A detailed outline of the reform initiatives in each of the eight regions follows.

Gungahlin

Education provision in this region will need to continue to expand to meet the needs of the growing population in Gungahlin. The greatest population growth has been in the suburb of Harrison. In response, a new state of the art primary school for students from preschool through to year 6 opened at the commencement of the 2008 school year. In its second year of operation, Harrison School has over 520 enrolments, the majority of whom are in the early childhood (P-2) years. The school also caters for students with disabilities and special needs ensuring these students residing in Gungahlin no longer have to travel out of the region to access special provisions.

The Government has also committed to set aside up to \$45 million for the establishment of Harrison High School to open in 2012 and ensure there is the capacity to cater for the anticipated growth in secondary-age students in this part of the Gungahlin region.

Planning is also well under way for the new Gungahlin College to commence operation in 2011 that will cater for the needs of senior secondary students in the region. The Gungahlin community, particularly the business sector, gave strong support to this proposal during the consultation period. The college will be seen as 'a facility for the community' as it will include a range of facilities available for community use, including a gymnasium and performing arts centre. A CIT flexible learning centre and a joint community/college library will also be part of this state of the art education complex.

The Hall Primary School, with declining ACT enrolments and only 43% of local enrolments (with a high proportion of NSW students) and ageing infrastructure, closed at the end of 2006 enabling these students to enroll at nearby Gold Creek or at another school of their choice and access more modern learning facilities and greater curriculum offerings. Hall Preschool continues to provide preschool programs for this small community as an annexe of Gold Creek School.

Belconnen South East

Given the very close proximity of school facilities in the suburb of Hawker, an opportunity was provided to establish the Hawker Collegiate of schools comprising Hawker preschool and primary schools, Belconnen High School and Hawker College. The collegiate arrangement facilitates greater continuity of educational programs, supportive transitions and shared teacher expertise and specialist resources. The feasibility of a single governance structure will be investigated at some time in the future.

Giralang Primary School, proposed for possible closure, has been retained and Giralang Preschool has been relocated into a modern purpose built facility within the main school building. The former preschool facility is now available for other community uses.

Kaleen High School continues to operate as the regional 7-10 school and the cluster arrangement with nearby P-6 schools at Giralang, Kaleen and Maribyrnong has been strengthened. Kaleen High School also provides

accommodation for the highly successful Instrumental Music Program with newly renovated facilities for large band rehearsals.

Southern Cross Primary School and Scullin Preschool amalgamated as a P-2 school and commenced operation from the beginning of the year. Childcare and before and after preschool and school programs will commence in April for the start of term 2 and Health services will be available on site from mid year.

Page Preschool closed in December 2007 due to low demand and an ageing population in the suburb and Cook Primary School and Cook Preschool closed in December 2007.

Canberra High School continues to operate as a comprehensive high school while strengthening its extension programs and curriculum offerings for gifted and talented students. Lake Ginninderra College has continued to enhance its links with the University of Canberra and the Australian Institute of Sport and offers courses in conjunction with these institutions.

Belconnen North West

The Melba-Copland Secondary School commenced operation with a single administrative structure in January 2008 and continues to operate on two sites (7-10 and 11-12).

Mount Rogers Primary School has flourished and now serves a wider area, with enrolments increasing by 26% from 2006 to 2009. Flynn Primary School closed at the end of 2006. Flynn Preschool has amalgamated as an annexe of Mount Rogers P-6 School along with Melba and Spence Preschools.

Charnwood Primary School and Charnwood Preschool now operate as one P-6 school known as Charnwood-Dunlop Primary School with a significantly increased total enrolment of 336 compared to 170 enrolments in 2006 when the school was operating at only 36% capacity. Holt and Higgins Primary Schools and Preschools closed at the end of 2008 and were very successfully incorporated into the Kingsford Smith School. Kingsford Smith opened at the start of the year with more than 750 students in years P-7.

North Canberra

Hackett Preschool was amalgamated as an annexe of North Ainslie Primary School from 2008 and Reid Preschool was amalgamated as an annexe of Ainslie Primary School from 2008. The inclusion of playschools and playgroups in these preschools continues to be a feature.

Watson and Downer Preschools amalgamated as annexes of Majura Primary School from 2008 and the Alan Maine Memorial Preschool at Duntroon amalgamated as an annexe of Campbell Primary School from 2008.

South Canberra

Narrabundah Primary School was severely underutilised and continued to experience a low take up of local area children. Like Isabella Plains and

Southern Cross, it has undergone a major refurbishment and from the commencement of this school year operates as a stand alone early childhood P-2 school. This allows the school to provide strengthened support for Indigenous students and others through the delivery of integrated family and support services. As with the other P-2 schools, 15 hours of preschool per week is available for each student and when before and after preschool and school programs, and Childcare and Health services open during 2009, it is anticipated the school will become an attractive option for families with young children living or working in the inner south.

Griffith Preschool amalgamated as an annexe of Red Hill Primary School in 2008 and Deakin Preschool as an annexe of Forrest Primary School. Yarralumla Primary School amalgamated with Yarralumla Preschool and the Montessori Preschool in 2008 and from the start of this year, and in accord with the wishes of the community, it has welcomed the Italian Bilingual Program formerly operating at Lyons Primary School.

Woden

This region has many schools in high demand and a significant proportion of students coming from outside the region. Melrose Primary School, however, with 82 students, 46% of its capacity being utilised and a very low projected enrolment, closed at the end of 2006. To meet the needs of families with very young children residing in Chifley, the preschool was retained and amalgamated as an annexe of Torrens Primary School from 2008, along with Pearce Preschool.

South Curtin and North Curtin Preschools were amalgamated as annexes of Curtin Primary School from 2008. Lyons Primary School commenced operation as a P-2 early childhood school with three and four year old preschool programs and a small kindergarten cohort at the beginning of 2009. When the major refurbishment is completed later in 2009, similar services to the other new early childhood schools will be available and a significant increase in enrolments is anticipated in the years ahead.

Weston Creek

This small region no longer had a sufficient population under 11 years to sustain five stand alone primary schools. Consequently, Rivett Primary School with only 71 students (ACT Department of Education and Training February 2006 School Census), only 28% capacity utilised and 32% of local students attending, and Weston Creek Primary with only 88 students (ACT Department of Education and Training February 2006 School Census), only 44% capacity utilised and 29% of local students enrolled, closed at the end of 2006. Weston Preschool was retained as an annexe of Arawang P-6 school in 2008. Stromlo High School established a middle schooling program from 2007 and began to accept year 6 students from the start of that school year.

Tuggeranong

As discussed earlier, changing demographics in the region, particularly in the greater Kambah area, required consideration of the facilities in the area with regard to future provision for students. Many older schools in the region are

undergoing or will undergo much needed renewal and refurbishment. Following consideration of the many issues – demographic, social, financial, enrolment projections and trends and the state of current facilities - the need for a new P-10 school was identified by the community.

The AEU in its submission gave strong support to this proposal. *The Development of a K to Year 10 school in the Kambah area similar to that being developed on the Ginninderra High School site.....would present Kambah families with a quality contemporary facility...a facility not available in Woden or South Canberra in either the Government or Non Government sectors.*

The need to close Mt Neighbour, Tharwa and Village Creek primary schools and Macarthur Preschool with ongoing very low enrolments was identified. Village Creek Preschool will be annexed to Taylor P-6 School until the new P-10 school opens in January 2011.

The new P-10 school will be constructed at a cost of \$54 million on the highly accessible site of the closed Kambah High School. With advanced environmentally sustainable design features it will be planned to attract a Five Green Star rating and offer a much enhanced range of services for the Kambah and north Tuggeranong area. As part of this project, consultation is currently occurring on the proposed closure of Urambi Primary School from December 2010.

The wider Chisholm community supported the amalgamation of Caroline Chisholm High School, Chisholm Primary School and Preschool, now known as Caroline Chisholm School from 2008. The three campuses of this P-10 school are in very close proximity and the school community has worked hard during 2008 to unify the school. The Year 6 students have been successfully housed on the senior campus allowing those students greater access to specialist facilities.

The refurbished Isabella Plains Primary School now operates as an early childhood P-2 school with the preschool incorporated into the main school building. Childcare will commence in April 2009.

1.5 Government support for the renewal and reform agenda

In the 2007-08 Budget, the Government injected an additional \$115 million in funding for the construction of Gungahlin College and the new P-10 school in Tuggeranong. Funding was also made available to support the increasing number of students seeking access to vocational education and training programs. This built on the initial funding injection of close to \$200 million over four years announced in the 2006-07 Budget to launch the reform process.

In the 2008-09 Budget, the Government again provided significant additional funding to continue its program of renewal and ensure the ACT's public education system continues to offer contemporary, high quality education for all students. The refurbishing of all public schools continues in 2009, in

tandem with the upgrading of facilities, the construction of halls and gymnasiums, and installation of high-speed internet access and state of the art ICT infrastructure in all schools.

The major focus of additional recurrent funding initiatives is provision of direct support to teachers and students. Recent budget initiatives include support for: literacy and numeracy; vocational learning and career education; languages education; pastoral care for students in every high school; Indigenous student achievement; revitalising physical education in primary schools; extending university/school study options for talented senior secondary students; and enhancing support for students at risk of leaving school, disadvantaged students and students with a disability. The Government is also making a major investment in teacher professional development to enhance the quality of teaching in schools and strengthen school leadership.

1.6 Educational outcomes

Literacy and Numeracy

Since the major reform and renewal program commenced, ACT students have continued to maintain their very high levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy as measured against national benchmarks. In terms of the ACT Assessment Program (ACTAP), there was no significant difference between the very high percentage of ACT public school students achieving above national benchmarks in reading, writing and numeracy in 2007, (with the exception of year 7 numeracy), compared with 2006, following the initial school closures and amalgamations.

In 2008 ACT students participated in the first-ever national testing program designed to assess all students across Australia at years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in reading, writing, language conventions (incorporating spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy. The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) report showed that the ACT had the highest or the equal highest percentage of students at or above the national minimum standard in Australia across reading, numeracy, writing and grammar and punctuation for years 3, 5, 7 and 9 and in spelling for years 7 and 9. The ACT also had the highest or the equal highest mean scores across reading and numeracy for years 3, 5, 7 and 9; across grammar and punctuation for years 5, 7 and 9; spelling for years 7 and 9; and writing for year 3. The ACT had the highest or equal highest percent of students in the highest achievement band for their year level in reading and grammar and punctuation across years 3, 5, 7 and 9 and in numeracy across years 3, 7 and 9.

The ACT also had both the highest or equal highest percent of students at or above the national minimum standard and the highest mean score in years 7 and 9 across all strands assessed, except writing. This represents a system-wide effect of sustained high performance. In all assessments, with the exception of spelling, ACT male and female students outperformed males and females nationally.

Civics and citizenship

The National Assessment Program also includes, as part of its triennial cycle, a national sample assessment of students in civics and citizenship. This assesses the knowledge and understanding of a group of year 6 and 10 students of Australia's system of government, political and legal institutions, civic life, and values of democratic citizenship including 'freedom, tolerance, respect and responsibility'. In the ACT, 595 year 6 students from 29 schools and 628 year 10 students from 28 schools participated in the October 2007 assessment cycle.

In general, ACT results have improved slightly since 2004, and in almost all respects remain higher than the national average and are ranked at or near the top of all jurisdictions (noting that in most cases, the differences in scores of jurisdictions immediately above and below the ACT are not statistically significant).

The report for year 6 shows that the ACT mean score was above the national mean and second among jurisdictions only to NSW. This was a slight improvement in ACT performance since 2004. In terms of the percentages of students at or above the Year 6 Proficient Standard, the ACT's result of 59.9% was higher than the national result of 53.4%, and second among jurisdictions. The ACT (along with Queensland and Victoria) had three of the shortest 'tails' in terms of the spread of its students' scores, indicating that lower-performing students were not as far behind the rest of the students in these jurisdictions.

The report for year 10 shows that the ACT mean score was above the national mean and second among jurisdictions only to NSW. This was a slight improvement in ACT performance since 2004. In terms of the percentages of students at or above the Year 10 Proficient Standard, the ACT's result of 50.1% was higher than the national result of 41.5%, and second among jurisdictions. The ACT result in 2007 was slightly higher than that in 2004.

TIMSS international programs

The Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) conducted every four years allows for international and national comparisons of system performance and an opportunity to compare mathematics and science achievement at the key stages of years 4 and 8. The TIMSS 2007 testing regime was the largest ever global assessment of year 4 and year 8 student achievements in these two disciplines and involved nearly 60 countries with a total of 425,000 students assessed.

In maths and science, ACT year 8 students performed better than students in other jurisdictions across Australia. When compared internationally, ACT year 8 students were ranked in the top 10 in the world. In mathematics their achievement placed the ACT sixth in the world ranking, and equal eighth in science. The ACT also had the highest proportion of male and female students performing at the advanced benchmark when compared with other males and females across the nation. The ACT had the highest average

score across all jurisdictions, significantly higher than the national result and placed sixth of 49 nations in terms of international achievement. 12% of students achieved the advanced benchmark level, and 69% achieved in the top three benchmarks. The data indicates that the ACT is achieving good outcomes in mathematics education for the largest percentage of year 8 students.

In year 8 science, one in five males (21%) and 12% of females achieved the advanced benchmark. The ACT had the highest average score across all jurisdictions, significantly higher than the national result and placed eighth of 49 nations in terms of international achievement. 16% of students achieved the advanced benchmark level, and 77% achieved in the top three benchmarks.

In year 4 mathematics and science, ACT students are among the best performers in Australia and compare reasonably well with international scale averages and medians. In mathematics the average ACT score was the third-highest in Australia and the ACT was one of four jurisdictions to achieve above the international average. 7% of students achieved the advanced benchmark and 68% achieved in the top three benchmark levels.

In science, the average ACT score was the fourth highest in Australia and the ACT, like all jurisdictions, achieved above the international average. 9% of students achieved the advanced benchmark and 76% achieved in the top three benchmark levels.

2. Impact of school closures and consolidation

2.1 Community experiences and attitudes

Following the announcement of the *Towards 2020* decisions and the closure of three preschools and seven primary schools, the annual satisfaction surveys of staff, parents and students in 2007³ showed continuing high levels of satisfaction with public schooling in the ACT. Nine out of 10 primary school and eight out of 10 high school parents and carers expressed satisfaction with their children's school and education. In addition, nine out of 10 school staff expressed satisfaction with their workplaces. It is important to note that almost half of the primary schools surveyed that year had enrolled students from schools or preschools that had closed at the end of 2006. One school included in the survey was closing at the end of 2007 and four of the schools had changed or were to change their year level structure or amalgamate with another school.

Four of the schools that closed at the end of 2006 also had special education programs for students with a disability or special needs and the majority of young people in these programs were very successfully relocated with their unit to a receiving school. All parents were contacted, consulted and kept informed about their options and possible new locations for the program. The

³ One third of schools each year complete satisfaction surveys as part of the School Improvement cycle.

2007 special education survey found 90 percent of parents and carers were satisfied with their child's special education program. A similar process was followed during 2007 and 2008 for closing schools with special programs.

The 2006 and 2007 School Excellence Reports and The Department of Education and Training Annual Reports for 2006-07 and 2007-08 are at Attachment K, and provide more details.

Another group of schools (one third of all schools), were externally validated in 2007. Again, many of the schools in this group were impacted by the *Towards 2020* decisions. Along with principals and other school executives, external validation teams include parent and community members. The *External Validation (summary) Report 2007* produced by the External Validator, a highly regarded external educationalist, noted the strong focus of schools to create safe and engaging learning environments for staff and students and the programs in place to support the inclusion and achievement of Indigenous students, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and those living in difficult financial and social circumstances. The Validator's report also commended the schools on their successful planning for, and managing changes to, school structures.

The report is included at Attachment L.

Throughout the renewal and reform process, community involvement in public schooling has continued to be strong. Parents, carers and school community members have maintained their high level of engagement, volunteers have continued to support student learning and school improvement, and community members have continued to contribute to department reference groups, advisory bodies and councils and to be actively involved in school boards.

In all schools that closed, principals and senior staff worked closely with families to assist in their move to another public school. Parents and staff were consulted, kept informed and well supported through the transition phase. All closing schools held information days for parents and carers and community members to assist students and their families to consider enrolment options and advise on transition support processes available. Orientation programs and open days and nights were conducted by receiving schools. Principals made every effort to assist parents minimise disruption or any significant financial hardship.

Following the first round of closures the Department obtained feedback on the process from principals and key staff in receiving schools and in schools that had closed. The feedback also included information passed on from parents about their experiences. This information was used to refine the processes and procedures used in the following years.

Parent associations and community organisations have also been actively involved in the concept design and development processes for all the new schools and participated in many consultation meetings focused on the

facilities to be offered in the new schools. Parent and community groups have also actively participated in the reference group that has steered the development of the framework for the new early childhood schools, the design of the totally refurbished schools and provided advice on integrated services that could be offered at each setting.

Community members have certainly voted with their feet in positively responding to many of the new models of schooling and to new schools. Enrolments of eligible four year old children in the preschool year in public primary schools and P-10 schools have continued to rise. In these settings parents can access 12 hours per week preschool and can opt for long or short day sessions. Enrolments have increased by over 8% in February 2009 compared to the same time in 2007. (TBC following completion of audited census figures). The strong enrolment at Melba-Copland Secondary School (cited above) is another robust example, as is the number of students from Holt and Higgins primary schools (over 91%) who have enrolled in Kingsford Smith School.

ACT Public School Census reports for 2006 to 2009 at [Attachment M](#), clearly illustrate the positive impact the *Towards 2020* renewal agenda has had on enrolments over time.

2.2 Student learning experiences

The detailed individual transition planning undertaken for students in all schools that closed was the key to ensuring there was as little disruptive impact as possible or lack of continuity in their education programs. Closing schools were allocated additional funding so that class teachers could be released to work with each student and their family to identify and consider their individual academic and social needs, any financial or future transport needs and develop the transition plan. The endeavour was to make transitions as smooth as possible for those students who needed to change schools.

A copy of a transition plan template is at [Attachment N](#).

Overall, 90% of students from closed schools were enrolled in an alternate public school of their choice by their parents or carers. Along with a copy of their transition plan, student records and profiles were also passed on to their receiving school. Receiving schools made every effort to ensure new students were welcomed and settled well into their new school and very closely monitored their progress in the basic skills. Parent surveys and student questionnaires were also used in some receiving schools to regularly check on progress, while other schools employed additional staff to work with the new students, provide learning assistance and monitor and assist with any social issues. Receiving schools were also provided with additional funding to ensure they had the resources to successfully accommodate and integrate all new students from closing schools.

All ACT public schools strive to achieve strong learning outcomes for all their students and strive for high standards for learning. All ACT public schools

offer innovative and challenging learning programs and experiences developed using the ACT Curriculum Framework and designed to address student learning needs. As indicated above, this approach means all public schools have continued to maintain their very high level of achievement in literacy and numeracy as measured against national and international benchmarks. Public schools also continue to be commended through external validation on the strong and sustained attention they give to literacy, numeracy and information technology.

2.3 Financial, social and environmental impacts

In implementing the reforms the Government took a number of steps to ensure ACT residents were not burdened with the costs incurred in its endeavour to make the system more financially sustainable and more economically viable (given that on average the system was costing 20% more than in other states). While significant savings were made by rationalising the number of schools and amalgamating others, the increased enrolments in many schools have ensured they are now much more economically, educationally and physically efficient and effective to operate. In the 2006-07 financial year the Government also addressed efficiencies in the public service agencies so less revenue went to administrative overheads and more to education and health services.

Excess capacity within each region and the close proximity of some schools were also important considerations in deciding to close some schools and preschools and align the region's capacity with local demand. The size of schools was also an important consideration given how it can impact financially, educationally and socially. Small schools, often with a small number of classes and year levels and fewer teachers, particularly specialist teachers, can limit the social, sporting and educational opportunities for students, especially students' access to rich curriculum activities across all the key learning areas. Research on school size by Professor Brian Caldwell, published in 2005, indicates from an educational perspective, an appropriate and effective size for a primary school is 300 to 400 students.

Professor Caldwell's paper is at [Attachment O](#).

Chapman and Arawang primary schools, with total enrolments of 404 and 372 respectively (in 2006) were examples of high demand effective schools in the Weston Creek Region. The average cost per annum of educating a student in these schools was \$8,124 and \$8,329 respectively. In contrast, Rivett Primary School had an enrolment of only 74 students at an average cost per annum of \$19,123 per student.

Contrast also two highly successful, high-demand schools in the Woden region – Curtin Primary School (enrolment 364, average cost per student \$8,861), and Torrens Primary School (enrolment 374, cost per student \$8,290), with Melrose Primary School (enrolment 82, average cost per student \$18,205 per annum).

Refer to earlier [Attachment D](#) for details of other schools.

The Government made available approximately \$1.2 million to assist families with any additional costs incurred in changing schools, for example, for the purchase of new uniforms and any additional transport costs. All affected students transferring to another public school were eligible for the one-off \$750 transitional support payment to off-set any financial impacts. This initiative has been positively received by parents and carers.

Representatives of the Department have also worked closely with schools, the community and ACTION during the renewal process to ensure transport needs of students were addressed wherever possible. The officers also tabled requests and concerns raised by parents and schools at regular School Transport Liaison Committee meetings, as did the Parents and Citizens Council member on the Committee. ACTION also developed and issued a questionnaire for families to assist them in planning school bus routes. Bus services were increased in response to demand, and in response to some specific issues, timetables were revised and new services introduced.

3. Community Responses

3.1 The consultation process

When the initial renewal proposal was announced on 6 June 2006, a comprehensive community consultation process was conducted for six months in accordance with the requirements of the *Education Act 2004* and with the *ACT Government Community Engagement Service Charter* and *Community Engagement Manual (Attachment P)*.

Initial briefings were provided for principals, representatives from the Australian Education Union, the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, the Community and Public Sector Union, the Canberra Preschool Society and the non-government education sector. In the days following the announcement, School Board Chairs were invited to consult with the principal and the region's Schools Director about the proposal.

Meetings with major stakeholder groups continued throughout the consultation period. A *Towards 2020* project team was established within the Department to manage the consultation process.

Eight four-page regional publications entitled *Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools (Attachment Q)* were distributed to school communities, key stakeholder groups and members of the broader community. These set out the current educational provision and the Government's proposal for each of the eight educational regions of Canberra: Gungahlin, Belconnen North West, Belconnen South East, North Canberra, South Canberra, Weston Creek, Woden and Tuggeranong.

These documents contained relevant data relating to government schools and preschools. School information covered current enrolment numbers, projected enrolments at 2010 (based on current sites), the enrolment capacity

of the school, the percentage of the school utilised, the percentage of students enrolled at each school coming from out of area and the percentage of government school students living in the school's priority enrolment area (PEA) who attended the school.

In addition, information was provided on the proposed regional school provision, including projected student enrolments at 2010 for each school under the proposed arrangements. Also included were details of the date and venue of community forums scheduled for each region, notification of the *Towards 2020* website address and telephone inquiry hotline number and information about how the community could seek clarification on the proposal and provide feedback.

Copies of *Towards 2020* publications were made available at ACT Government Shopfronts and the Gungahlin Library. A leaflet was also distributed to all households in the ACT providing the details of community forums and contact details. An open letter from the Minister to parents and carers in affected schools was included in school newsletters. Letters were also sent to families of students with special needs to invite them to meet with school and special education staff to discuss the particular transitional support needs of their children should the proposal proceed.

The Department's *Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools* website was activated immediately following the announcement. It contained the same information as the printed publications, as well as a page for each school which gave parents and carers and community members access to information concerning the possible effects on their school community.

Papers on the education models proposed were available for reference, and Frequently Asked Questions were updated regularly in response to common questions. Additional statistical and financial information was also posted on the site. The website detailed the avenues available to the community to provide feedback and seek further information.

Ten community forums were offered to the public. An evening public forum was held in each of the eight regions during June and July 2006. The Minister for Education and Training outlined the educational, demographic, social and financial criteria drawn upon in developing the proposal and, along with Departmental representatives, answered questions from the floor.

In October 2006, Departmental officers and Ministerial staff attended a community forum for parents and carers of students with special needs. The Minister also attended a Youth InterACT forum which was held to discuss the *Towards 2020* proposal with school age young people and representatives of the Ministerial Youth Council.

Between August and October 2006 a series of five education seminars was held, focusing on the new curriculum framework, early years of schooling, emerging technologies and special education (refer to earlier [Attachment F](#)). Over 600 people attended these seminars.

In addition, the Chief Executive and/or senior Departmental officers attended meetings of the Canberra Preschool Society to discuss preschool issues and the Indigenous Education Consultative Body to discuss issues for Indigenous students and their families.

The ACT Chief Minister, the Minister for Education and Training and the Department provided over 1650 responses to correspondence received regarding the *Towards 2020* proposal during the consultation period. This included responses to emails, letters and submissions.

Over 700 meetings were attended by the Minister, Ministerial staff and Departmental officers during the six-month consultation period. These included group and individual meetings with parents and carers, school communities, members of school boards, Parents and Citizens Councils, Preschool Parents Associations, community members, business groups and other stakeholders.

The Minister visited, or met with representatives of every school proposed for closure and in a number of cases followed up with further meetings with school communities. He met with representatives of school boards, parents' associations, the ACT Government School Education Council, the Non-Government Schools Education Council, the Australian Education Union and community groups. These meetings provided the opportunity for the Minister to hear the views of the community and to consider issues over the length of the consultation period.

Examples of the Minister's correspondence to school communities in June 2006 and December 2006 are at [Attachment R](#).

Over 350 formal submissions were received on the proposal. Submissions were called for by Friday 3 November 2006 but were accepted until the end of the consultation period on 6 December 2006. The Minister personally read and considered every submission.

A table showing the numbers of submissions for each school is available in the publication, *Towards 2020 Consultation Report (December 2006)*, at [Attachment S](#).

All submissions for which permission was given for publication were placed on the *Towards 2020* website from 13 December 2006. Some communities developed a collaborative approach to preparing submissions that involved school governance groups, school staff, parents and carers and community members.

3.2 Consultation feedback

While the majority of individual school communities argued that their school should not close or be amalgamated with another, much of the general feedback recognised a review of government schooling provision was needed. Even when individuals or groups opposed specific aspects of the

proposal, they frequently recognised the need for the Government to make some changes. A key stakeholder group, the Primary Principals Association, commended many aspects of the *Towards 2020* proposals, while asking that alternative proposals put forward by school communities be duly considered.

Some submissions recommended a set of criteria be established for the viability of schools into the future, suggesting this could act as a guide and incentive for schools. A small number of submissions put in suggestions for alternative uses for school sites (for example for low cost housing or for childcare facilities) if closures proceeded.

The major issues identified through submissions, correspondence and meetings were:

- the high value parents and carers place on their current school of choice
- the importance of the neighbourhood school and small schools generally
- community endorsement of the high priority given to early childhood education and support for the integration of preschools into primary schools (with some caveats)
- questions about the different structural models put forward and recommendations the same range of models be available within each region
- recommendations for P-2 rather than P-3 structures
- endorsement of the 11-12 senior secondary college model
- concerns about the potential educational, social and financial impacts of the proposal on particular student groups and their families
- questions about the accuracy of the demographic and financial data used to underpin the proposal, particularly in relation to enrolment patterns and school capacity
- questions about Government funding priorities and the costs and benefits for the community as a whole
- concerns about the consultation process itself, including criticism of the timelines for proposed closures
- the need to provide support for students and families in the transition to any new arrangements.

Many letters and submissions expressed appreciation for the opportunity to review what they valued about their school(s) and to engage in community debate. A common comment was the consultation process had *galvanised the school community* into identifying what it valued and was prepared to defend.

Staff and parents appreciated the readiness of the Minister and Departmental staff to visit schools and preschools, to make time for meetings to consider specific issues and to engage with and respond to community questions. Parents and carers of children with special needs were particularly appreciative of the time given to listen to their concerns.

On the other hand, there were many parents, community members and stakeholder groups who were dissatisfied with the consultation process. Some expressed a view decisions had been already taken and the consultation was not genuine.

Others suggested that a more effective and inclusive process would have involved school communities in developing proposals, prior to a formal consultation process. Some objected to the overlap of the consultation process with contingency transition planning. A commonly expressed view was, although the legislative requirements for consultation had been met, a proposal of this magnitude needed a longer process of community engagement.

Following the six month consultation period as required by the *Education Act 2004*, and after careful consideration of the submissions, correspondence and range of community views expressed at consultation meetings, the Minister decided that of the 21 preschools that were suggested for possible closure, nine would close; and of the 17 schools considered for possible closure, 12 would close. Of the 15 possible options for school amalgamation or changed administrative arrangements proposed, 8 would proceed. In making his decisions, the Minister considered the possible educational, social and financial impact on students at affected schools, their families, and the general school community, and also focused on future access to and provision of quality educational opportunities within each region.

On request from community members and to meet the requirements of the *Administrative Decisions (Judicial review) Act 1989*, the Minister provided statements of reasons for his decision to close schools. In the statement for each school he set out the reasons for his decision and provided detailed findings on material questions of fact in response to issues raised in the submissions by the public in relation to possible or perceived educational, social and financial impacts.

Copies of the statements of reasons provided by the Minister are at Attachment T.

3.3 The Education Amendment Bill 2008

Under the current legislation, the Minister must inform the school community about the proposal, consult with the affected community for a period of at least six months, take into account their views, and make and implement the final decision. This was the process closely followed to the letter in 2006, as outlined above, which allowed the community to fully participate in the debate and provide their responses, as illustrated above.

In contrast, the Bill presented by Ms Meredith Hunter MLA proposes a lengthy process in which the Minister for Education and Training must firstly consult with the community for at least six months to identify any alternatives to his/her proposal to close or amalgamate the school; and secondly, after publishing the intention to proceed with the proposal in the press, consult further with the affected community for a minimum of 12 months, followed by

a minimum period of six months after the final decision before the closure or amalgamation could take place.

Under the timelines set out in the Amendment Bill it could take up to two and a half years (depending on when the process started), to close or amalgamate a school. Further delays could occur at the end of the process if a community member sought to have the decision reviewed under the *Administrative Decisions (Judicial review) Act 1989*. In the ACT's neighbouring jurisdiction, NSW, an announcement is made by 30 June in one year, followed by three months of consultation, and, if the closure proceeds, it takes place at the end of the following year.

Past experience has shown where there is speculation a school may close, enrolments usually decline quickly to a low level, which may result in the school not being viable once the proposal to close is made. Under the proposed Bill, such a school would be required to remain open with minimal enrolments for the second 12 months consultation period and the six months closure period. This would likely result in a poor educational experience for the small cohort of students left attending such a school and would come with significant overhead and running costs, as there is a minimum staffing requirement for each school under the current industrial agreement.

A period of six months further delay between the making of a final decision and the closure of the school appears excessive, being considerably more time than would be necessary for parents to seek alternative schools.

The ACT Government community engagement manual, *Your Guide to Engaging with the Community*, (referred to earlier at Attachment P) which was itself developed after community consultation, states *for large projects, policies and strategies seeking comprehensive feedback, twelve weeks [consultation] is recommended*.

The current process under Section 20 of the *Education Act 2004*, providing a consultation period of six months, allows an appropriate balance between the government's responsibility to utilise available resources appropriately, and the need for community consultation in any decision to close a public school. Any extension or additional requirements to the consultation process would tie-up school resources to the detriment of the public education system.

Further, if the issues of the cost benefit analysis (which is also required as part of the initial process), and alternative options are consulted on in the first consultation period, there does not appear to be any significant value in the second period of consultation.

Given current Government commitments in relation to school closures, any amendments to the school closure consultation provisions would not be required until after 2012.

3.4 Interest expressed by community to re-open schools listed for closure

Following the Minister's announcement of his decision on 13 December 2006 to close 12 schools, only two community groups determined they would take action to challenge the Minister's decision. Neither group however, sought an immediate order to reopen the school.

The first group, Flynn Primary School Parents and Citizens Association, commenced proceedings against the ACT Government in the Supreme Court in February 2007 in relation to Flynn Primary School that closed at the end of 2006. Following a number of directions hearings and adjournments made at the request of Flynn P&C, these proceedings continued until very recently when, by consent, they were dismissed.

The other group, Cook Primary School P&C Association, commenced an action in the ACT Supreme Court in mid February 2007 in relation to the decision to close Cook Primary School at the end of 2007. One week after the first directions hearing, the group decided to withdraw their application and discontinue their challenge.

The cost in the first year to re-open an 'average' closed primary school could be as much as \$2 million, or even more, depending on how much work was required at the school. This would include the costs of re-commissioning the school, renewing the IT infrastructure, making necessary repairs to buildings, plant or equipment, purchase of computers, library books and other educational resources, and transition support costs for students and families. Additional expenditure may also be incurred if staffing supplementation was required to ensure a full curriculum could be delivered if the year cohorts in the school were of a very small size. There could also be a similar effect on nearby smaller schools, with a flow on financial impact.

The ongoing cost in the following years would be around \$0.6 million per year depending on how much interest was shown by families and students to re-enroll.

3.5 New uses for school facilities

After each school closed, the buildings were immediately handed over to the Properties Section of the Department of Territory and Municipal Services (TAMS) to manage. During 2007 the Government agreed on a process to determine the future use of the schools and preschools that had closed and those that were to close. Four generic options were identified for school reuse:

- retain buildings for community use with conversion of playing fields for future use
- retain school buildings for community use with disposal of playing fields for future development
- retain part of the school buildings for community use with disposal of the larger areas for development
- demolish all buildings on the site and dispose of the site for development.

In May 2008, GHD consultants, on behalf of the ACT Government, undertook a very comprehensive community consultation process on the future use of vacant land on eight of the surplus school sites. Thousands of Canberrans provided their views and put forward ideas through community forums, phone surveys, information stalls, public meetings and written submissions. The GHD consultation process generally found strong support for retaining green space and opposition to development, particularly medium and high density housing, on open space.

Around this time, the Government also called for expressions of interest from community organisations seeking accommodation in one of three new regional community centres (RCC) to be established and that the Government would spend \$14.2m setting these up. They included: an Arts Hub at Cook; a Health and Welfare Hub at Melrose; and a Community Services Hub at Weston. Community groups that had previously lodged applications with TAMS Property Group were included in the selection process. The closing date for expressions of interest was Friday 20 June 2008.

In developing the RCCs, the Government responded positively to consultations on the future of the former school sites and the demonstrated urgent need for more community space in Canberra. The community organisations will be given long-term tenancies and all existing community tenants utilising surplus school space were guaranteed on-going accommodation. The RCCs will offer a range of services covering the spectrums of culture, health, family, welfare and recreation - with neighbourhood halls established in three of these and at five other locations, as well as eight Community Parks offering open green space. The closed Holt school will also become an RCC.

It was also important for the Government to balance the views of local communities with the demand for aged and supported accommodation within the suburbs. Work will be undertaken at both Rivett and Mt. Neighbour sites to prepare the remainder of the land for release for aged and supported accommodation. Rivett will retain community space with childcare and a community park. A small parcel of land on Village Creek site will also be made available for aged care/supported accommodation with the balance of the site to be retained for community use and a government tenant in the former primary school.

Up to eight neighbourhood halls will be available for casual hire and will either be refurbished or newly constructed at Holt, Cook, Weston, Griffith, Village Creek and Bonython. Community Parks will be developed at Macarthur, Rivett, Mt Neighbour, Cook, Melrose, Weston, Holt and Village Creek and it is anticipated they will contain play equipment for children, barbecues, paths, seating, lighting and green space.

The Government's funding commitment to redeveloping the former school sites extends to \$29.8 million for refurbishment and new building works, \$2.4 million for community parks and \$300,000 for landscape plans, resulting in a total capital funding allocation of \$32.5 million.

Attachment U provides more details on these processes and outcomes.

4. Conclusion

There are many strong examples to illustrate the successful implementation of the Government's reform and renewal process and the impact of the Government's record investment of funding into public education in the ACT. The Government would encourage the Standing Committee members to visit schools to see first hand some of the high quality, innovative education programs being delivered in contemporary facilities.

To view particular features of the reform, visits to some of the following sites are recommended:

Narrabundah P-2 School – an excellent example of a primary school totally refurbished to a high standard to facilitate the delivery of best-practice early childhood programs.

Kingsford Smith School – a new P-10 school in its first year of operation designed to meet the educational needs of students in the 21st century - built to replace the former Holt and Higgins preschools and primary schools and to serve the residents of south western Belconnen and north western Molongolo. Students are currently enrolled in preschool through to year 7.

Melba-Copland Secondary School – the ACT's first 7-12 school has proved to be a popular choice of families. The school operates on two campuses with a single administrative structure and has had significant refurbishment.

Torrens Primary School – a high demand P-6 school that embraced students from closed students and offers its preschool programs on three sites.

Caroline Chisholm School – a successful example of how the amalgamation of a preschool, primary and high school, all in very close proximity, can operate as a P-10 school.

Harrison Primary School – a fine example of a state-of-the-art P-6 school. It opened in 2008 to serve the growing population in Harrison and surrounding areas.

Campbell High School – a 7-10 school that retained its current structure and has had extensive refurbishment.

Lyneham Primary School – a P-6 school that successfully integrated a significant number of students who transitioned from schools that closed such as Hall and Flynn primary schools.

Duffy Primary School – provides an example of how special needs students with autism were successfully transitioned into newly refurbished specialist facilities in a P-6 school.

Giralang Primary School – an example of a P-6 school where the preschool program has been relocated into a fully refurbished early learning classroom within the main school building.

Attachments

- A. *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools* (consultation/proposal booklet)
ACT Government (June 2006)**
- B. *Australian Capital Territory Budget 2006-07; 2007-08 and Appropriation (No 2): 2008-09 and Appropriation (No 2)***
- C. *Canberra; A Social Atlas ABS 2006*
*1307.8 – Australian Capital Territory in Focus, 2006 (ABS)***
- D. *Financial information – Operating Costs and Savings from Closures* (for each school proposed for closure), DET (2006); *Calculations of Cost per Student per School*, DET (2006)**
- E. *Education papers: Towards 2020 website*, DET (2006, 2007)**
- F. *Education Seminar Series 2006-2007 outlines*, DET (2006, 2007)**
- G. *Toronto first Duty Program*, City of Toronto, Canada**
- H. *The Best Start in Life: The importance of early childhood education*, Andrew Barr MLA, (2007)
Early childhood schools: a framework for their development as learning and development centres for children (birth to eight) and their families, DET (2008)
Southern Cross Early Childhood School (brochure) and similar brochures for Lyons, Narrabundah, Isabella Plains and O'Connor Cooperative School, DET (2008)
Whole of government policy framework for the early years, Jenkins, S. (2005)
Early Childhood Education: pathways to quality and equity for all children; Australian Education Review, ACER, (2006)**
- I. *Report of the review of Government Secondary Colleges on Behalf of the ACT Department of Education and Training*, Atelier Learning Solutions, (2006)**
- J. *Towards 2020* (summary of the Minister's decisions and the package of reforms announced by the Minister following the consultation period) (December 2006)**
- K. *School Excellence Reports 2006 and 2007*, DET
*Department of Education and Training Annual Report 2006-07 and 2007-08***

- L. External validation (Summary) Report, DET (2007)**
- M. School Census Reports (2006 to 2009) DET (2009 census TBC following March audit).**
- N. Towards 2020 Student Transition Plan (template)**
- O. Research on school size: An educational transformations briefing paper. Educational Transformations. Melbourne. Caldwell, B. (2005).**
- P. Your Guide to Engaging with the Community: ACT Government Community Engagement Manual and ACT Government Community Engagement Service Charter, (2005)**
- Q. Towards 2020: renewing our Schools: regional brochures: outcomes of the consultation, DET, (December 2006)**
- R. Official correspondence – examples of letters from Minister Barr sent to schools, community members, families, school staff members on 6 June 2006 and 13 December 2006**
- S. Towards 2020 Consultation Report, DET, (December 2006) Samples of Submissions Towards 2020 Website(2006)**
- T. Notice of Decision – statements of reasons for those schools where a request was made by community members or organizations, Minister for Education and Training, (December 2006)**
- U. Links to Purdon and GHD consultation outcomes documentation, DHCS website, www.dhcs.act.gov.au**