

Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system

Independent Submission

3 April 2009

This submission focuses on the use of demographic information in formulation of the ACT Government's *Towards 2020* policy.

Falling projected school enrolments provided a primary argument for the need to adjust overall school capacity. Two factors contributing to these projected falls were identified namely i) projected falls in the number of children of school age and ii) a falling proportion of children being enrolled in government schools. Projections were prepared, both overall and for individual schools, which became an important part of the justification for specific school closures. The overall demographic projections used for school closures were well based. However, the method used for individual schools projections was unreliable.

During the 2006 consultation period I became involved with the Chifley Action Group (CAG) and assisted with the preparation of their submission in relation to Melrose Primary School. (The Melrose Primary School was established as a consequence of an earlier school rationalisation when Chifley Primary and Pearce Primary were amalgamated.) My main involvements were with the analysis of relevant demographic information and with the conduct of a survey of parents living in the Melrose Primary School and Chifley Preschool catchment areas.

After reading the Department of Education and Training's policy document I was deeply concerned that their *Towards 2020* policy was based on faulty data. The underlying data was out of date and, because of the simplistic assumptions that had been used in their preparation, the projections for some individual schools were seriously in error. Detailed and current suburb and age specific information had been published by the ABS but had not been used. The more current and detailed information did not affect the overall need for school closures. However, as this information substantially altered the enrolment assumptions that the Department had been making about Melrose Primary School, and as community consultation had been invited, I felt it important that this information should be made available both to the Department and to the Minister. Ms Louise Evans (at the time board chair, Melrose Primary School) and I met with the Minister and the head of DET to express these concerns. I understand that a copy of the submission prepared by the Chifley Action Group at that time concerning enrolment projections has been attached to a submission prepared for the current inquiry by Louise Evans.

The individual school projections prepared by DET were unreliable because they assumed that the same demographic trend applied to all schools within an area. In 2006 ABS data for the Woden

Valley showed an 8% decline in children in the 0-4 age group compared to the 5-9 age group. Chifley, which was (and is still) undergoing urban renewal, showed a 69% increase, one of the highest rates of growth of preschool age children in Canberra. After allowing for the growth in Chifley, the decline in the rest of Woden was 13%. The effect of DET's simplistic assumption was to substantially understate enrolment projections for Melrose Primary School (with an offsetting overstatement of projected enrolments for the rest of Woden).

An inconsistency in the official documentation available at the time of the 2006 consultations showed there was a problem with the projections. The *Towards 2020* publication showed projected 2006 enrolments for Melrose Primary that were 26% below the actual enrolments in that year. But more importantly the DET projections showed enrolments continuing to decline when published ABS demographic data implied steadily increasing enrolments. A specially commissioned survey of 1500 school-catchment households reinforced the ABS data and provided valuable additional information by clarifying parental intentions with respect to future enrolment at Melrose Primary. By the year 2010 the discrepancy between DET's 'projections' (the numbers that ignored the actual demographic trend in the school catchment) was almost half the enrolment projection based on the actual demographic situation and parental enrolment intentions data. Up to 2011 the projections were based on ABS information about children already living in the school catchment area. Further projections suggested that if the demographic trends apparent in 2006 continued, enrolments could have exceeded the school's capacity (as defined by DET) as early as 2015.

As a concerned citizen, I felt several important lessons could be learnt from the 2006 consultation experience.

- Evidence based policy should be based on current data that is appropriate to the intended use. In *Towards 2020* individual school enrolment projections relied on incorrect and inappropriate assumptions while ignoring detailed published official data.
- Feedback from consultation processes should show that serious comments have been taken seriously. Decision processes should be transparent. The closing of Melrose Primary School in the face of evident urban renewal and the likelihood that the school could be operating at or in excess of its capacity within a relatively short time frame (by 2015), led many in the community to conclude that the closure was not based on educational considerations but a broader unspoken agenda. This resulted in the 2006 consultation process being discredited in the eyes of some.
- For decisions that involve the write off of large investments such as government schools, a long term view based on reliable and specific demographic projections is necessary. Such decisions will usually also impact less tangible but nevertheless significant community capital. The demand for school places is cyclical and dependent on the changing demography of areas. Where new suburbs are initially populated by a high proportion of young families, after the initial surge of primary school enrolment, demand will tend to decline over several decades. As the aging population is replaced by a new wave of young families demand will again pick up. If in addition this trend is accompanied by higher population density and higher fertility rates significant change is possible in the demand for enrolments.
- Because changes in the number of small children in area can play out over a period of decades, a clear understanding of the expected changes is needed. Where enrolments

are near the bottom of one of these long term cycle, bridging or interim arrangements may be appropriate if there is evidence of long term viability. In the case of Melrose Primary School a large amount of physical capital is tied up in the school buildings and equipment. Interim arrangements were not utilised but given the increase in preschool and school age children in the area and the pattern of primary school provision in the rest of the Woden Valley, consideration should be given to reopening the school.

- Parents of young families need a clear understanding of government intentions with respect to the provision of primary schools. The long term strategy for primary school provision should be public and changes to the strategy should require long term mandatory notice of the proposed change. This would enable affected families to plan major decisions such as the purchase and sale of property with confidence about the likely impact on the family. In the case of Chifley, many young families bought into the area expecting their children (actual and planned) would use the local school. They were left stranded by a decision that in the specific case of Melrose, did not take into account likely future enrolments.

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