



ACT GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE REPORT BY THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION,
TRAINING AND YOUTH AFFAIRS**

**INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL CLOSURES AND REFORM
OF THE ACT EDUCATION SYSTEM 2006.**

REPORT 2, SEPTEMBER 2009

**Presented by
Mr Andrew Barr MLA
Minister for Education and Training**

Government Response Overview

Recommendation	Government View
1. The Committee recommends that the ACT Government expedites the refurbishment and leasing arrangements for regional community centres, where appropriate, so that these centres can contribute to the vitality of the neighbouring communities.	Agreed
2. The Committee recommends that the delays associated with the heritage assessment of the Flynn Primary School site be investigated by the ACT Government and resolved as soon as possible.	Noted
3. The Committee recommends that the ACT Government urgently liaise with the representatives of the John Flynn Community Group, or other members of the Flynn community, to negotiate the viability of their, or alternative, proposals for the closed school site.	Agreed
4. The Committee recommends that the ACT Government's consultation guidelines include advice regarding the legacy of online consultation documents. These guidelines should set out measures to ensure that such documents will not mislead the public in the future about the provision of public services.	Noted
5. The Committee recommends that ministerial advisers be reminded of their ethical obligation to disclose any conflict of interest they may have in a matter during negotiations on behalf of a Minister with members of the community.	Noted
6. The Committee recommends that the democratic rationale of a citizen centred governance model be incorporated into the ACT Government's community consultation and engagement guidelines and report to the Legislative Assembly on the progress.	Noted
7. The Committee recommends that the consultation period of at least six months be maintained for individual school closures as set out in section 20 of the <i>Education Act 2004</i> and that consultation should incorporate a social impact study.	Agreed in part
8. The Committee recommends that any mass school closures or changes to the education system on a scale of <i>Towards 2020</i> should in future be taken to the electorate as an election policy in the preceding election.	Noted
9. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education undertake a social impact assessment of the <i>Towards 2020</i> reform process and report back to the Legislative Assembly on the findings. The social impact assessment should document the social impacts that have occurred as a consequence of the <i>Towards 2020</i> implementation process and establish whether mitigation strategies deployed have been adequate.	Agreed in part

<p>10. The Committee recommends that the ACT Government develop comprehensive, public guidelines for the conduct of public social impact assessments for any closures or amalgamations of ACT schools and similar high impact Government service decisions.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>11. The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Training ensures that Primary School Boards with governance responsibilities for amalgamated preschools include a member of the Preschool Parents Association.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>12. The Committee recommends that the ACT Government include, as a part of the social impact assessment to be undertaken, the effect of preschool closures on the operation and viability of playgroups in the ACT.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>13. The Committee recommends that, based on the demographic, educational, social and economic evidence presented during the Inquiry, that the Government immediately commences the process to reopen the Hall and Tharwa Primary Schools.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>14. The Committee recommends that data about school capacity be regularly reviewed by the Department of Education and Training and provided to each government school and the school community for endorsement. Where this data is disputed by the school or the community of interest, an independent review process should be established to resolve perceived discrepancies to the satisfaction of the school and the Department of Education and Training.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>15. The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Training undertake, and make publicly available, research on the educational outcomes for students relocated in ACT public schools as a consequence of the <i>Towards 2020</i> restructure.</p>	<p>Not agreed</p>

THE COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government expedites the refurbishment and leasing arrangements for regional community centres, where appropriate, so that these centres can contribute to the vitality of the neighbouring communities.

Agreed

The Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (DHCS) continues to work to the timeframe of June 2010 for completion of refurbishment of eight former school sites, construction of two new neighbourhood halls and tenancy agreements for over 40 non-governmental organisations.

Rivett

The refurbishment at the former Rivett Primary School and relocation of Noah's Ark Children's Resource Centre was completed and launched by the then Minister for Community Services, Ms Katy Gallagher, on 28 October 2009.

Cook

The refurbishment of the former Cook Primary School involves the creation of a hub for 10 community and arts organisations, including a neighbourhood hall and the construction of a community park by Territory and Municipal Services (TaMS). Refurbishment has now begun and the expected completion date is April 2010.

Holt

The refurbishment of the former Holt Primary School involves the creation of a hub for four community organisations, including a neighbourhood hall and the construction of a community park by TaMS. Refurbishment has begun and the expected completion date is April 2010.

Melrose/Chifley

The refurbishment of the former Melrose Primary School involves the creation of a hub for 14 health and wellbeing organisations, including a neighbourhood meeting room and the construction of a community park by TaMS. Designs are finalised, refurbishment is scheduled to begin in the new year, and the expected completion date is June 2010.

Weston Creek

The refurbishment of the former Weston Creek Primary School involves the creation of a hub for 13 community organisations, including a neighbourhood hall and the construction of a community park by TaMS. Designs are finalised, refurbishment is scheduled to begin in the new year, and the expected completion date is June 2010.

Village Creek

The refurbishment of the former Village Creek Primary School involves refurbishment of the ACT Health Equipment Loans Service and the construction of a community

park by TaMS. Refurbishment has commenced and is scheduled for completion in May 2010.

New halls

Development applications have been approved for Bonython and Griffith neighbourhood halls. Construction began at Bonython in November 2009 and is scheduled to begin at Griffith on part block 47, section 78, in December 2009. They are expected to be completed within the next six months.

Mount Neighbour and the remainder of Rivett

Community parks are to be constructed by TaMS and sites are to be used for residential aged care and supported accommodation. The demolition of the Mount Neighbour site commenced on 6 December 2009 and is expected to be completed by the end of January 2010. The demolition of the remainder of the Rivett site commenced on 4 December 2009 and is expected to be completed on 15 January 2010.

Hall

The Hall Preschool remains in operation. The refurbishment of the Hall cottage, tennis courts and men's shed for the Village of Hall and District Progress Association was completed in October 2009 and meets with the conditions of the heritage listing. The refurbishment included: removal of asbestos; creating an accessible entrance; installation of a disabled toilet; and a general upgrade so the space can be utilised as an office and meeting area for the community. Currently, \$55 000 has been expended however final invoices have not yet been received.

Work on the Hall Pavilion (separate heritage listed site) is expected to commence in January 2010, for completion in February 2010. The work includes general kitchen, bathroom, hot water and heating upgrades, and acoustic insulation as requested by the community. The scope of this refurbishment is still being finalised.

Tharwa

The Tharwa Preschool remains in operation. Work commenced on the former primary school classroom on 9 September 2009 after consultation with members of the community. The refurbishment of the former primary classroom, kitchen and outside amenities was completed in October 2009. Work included removal of some asbestos, minor works, heating, floor strengthening, kitchen upgrade and painting and was consistent with the heritage nomination conditions for the building. Currently, \$42 000 has been expended however final invoices have not yet been received.

Tharwa residents' advice was that the current corrugated iron hall adjacent to the tennis courts does not have kitchen facilities and that the upgrade of kitchen facilities in the school building will be of use. The Tharwa hall and kitchen were utilised by the community for the Tharwa Fair in October 2009 and are now available for further use by the community.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Committee recommends that the delays associated with the heritage assessment of the Flynn Primary School site be investigated by the ACT Government and resolved as soon as possible.

Noted

There has not been a significant delay in assessing the Flynn Primary School nomination to the ACT Heritage Register. The nomination was received on 21 December 2007. The nomination was referred to the next Heritage Council (the Council) meeting on 6 March 2008, where it was accepted. There is no legislative timeframe for a decision to be made on a nomination to the ACT Heritage Register.

The Council decided to commission the Australian Institute of Architects ACT to undertake a comparative assessment of all four Taglietti designed schools in the ACT. A Taglietti designed school (Giralang Primary) had previously been accepted as a nomination to the ACT Heritage Register. This was announced via the ACT Heritage Grants program in late August 2008 and the Deed of Agreement was signed on 25 September 2008.

A draft report has been received by the ACT Heritage Unit and has been referred to the Council for consideration. It should be noted that while a study may reach particular conclusions, the Council will undertake an independent assessment of those claims with which they may agree or disagree.

At this stage, the Council is still considering the study and has not yet formed an opinion on whether the Flynn or Giralang schools reach the threshold to warrant listing.

The study was discussed at a meeting on 10 December 2009. The Council has requested that the registered Taskforce give further consideration to the nomination. A formal decision about Flynn Primary is expected to be provided at the first meeting of 2010, which is proposed for 4 March 2010.

If the Council decides that the former Flynn Primary School site reaches the threshold to warrant listing, a citation will be drafted to Council's satisfaction prior to a decision on provisional listing being made.

It is important to note that the management and future use of a site is not a consideration in determining whether or not a site has heritage significance.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government urgently liaise with the representatives of the John Flynn Community Group, or other members of the Flynn community, to negotiate the viability of their, or alternative, proposals for the closed school site.

Agreed

The Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (DHCS) is taking the lead role in this liaison. Territory and Municipal Services Property Group is being kept informed and has agreed to this approach.

A Joint Steering Committee for the Flynn Community Hub has been formed with members of the John Flynn Community Group and DHCS to consider a range of possible community uses for the school and grounds, such as a child care centre and other child related activities. This group has met four times since late September 2009. There will be further consultation with the broader community to develop a proposal for consideration.

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government's consultation guidelines include advice regarding the legacy of online consultation documents. These guidelines should set out measures to ensure that such documents will not mislead the public in the future about the provision of public services.

Noted

Guidance to support document dating and the use of archiving hierarchies to provide clarity on consultation progression, where appropriate, will be considered as part of a review of consultation guidelines.

Tools such as Google search functions on government websites may lead to confusion about the currency of some documents.

Guidelines for ACT Government Engagement are currently being developed in consultation with all agencies. The guidelines will have a focus on the practical development and implementation of community engagement activities. This will include specific guidance on the effective communication of the progress and outcomes of engagement projects.

The guidelines will also have a significant focus on the use of online consultation and Web 2.0 technologies. The guidelines will stipulate the need for version control in an online environment, ensuring that all documents posted on websites, including the Community Engagement website, are clearly dated and versions identified.

The guidelines will also state the need to appropriately archive 'out-of-date' documents, ensuring they remain available to the public on-line if required. Guidelines for posting information on the Community Engagement website will also be reviewed and refreshed to ensure that document control and tracking processes are in place.

It should be noted that the *Towards 2020* documents have been online since 6 June 2006.

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Committee recommends that ministerial advisers be reminded of their ethical obligation to disclose any conflict of interest they may have in a matter during negotiations on behalf of a Minister with members of the community.

Noted

The Legislative Assembly Members' Staff Manual (September 2009) contains details of staff obligations with regard to ethics, fraud and corruption and public interest disclosure.

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Committee recommends that the democratic rationale of a citizen centred governance model be incorporated into the ACT Government's community consultation and engagement guidelines and report to the Legislative Assembly on the progress.

Noted

Community engagement initiatives are a key part of the citizen centred governance project. This will be reflected in new consultation and engagement manuals. It should be acknowledged that citizen engagement in public policy is not a substitution for representative democracy, nor is it a form of direct democracy.

The Government provides annual reports to the Assembly on progress against *The Canberra Plan*. Agencies provide comprehensive reporting on agency performance. There is also detailed reporting on community engagement in annual reports. Additional reporting would duplicate these existing efforts.

RECOMMENDATION 7

The Committee recommends that the consultation period of at least six months be maintained for individual school closures as set out in section 20 of the Education Act 2004 and that consultation should incorporate a social impact study.

Agreed in part

Section 20 (5) (b) of the *Education Act 2004* (the Act) already requires a six month consultation period.

Social impacts are already considered as per section 20 (5) (a) of the Act, which states: 'Before closing or amalgamating a government school, the Minister must have regard to the educational, financial and social impact on students at the school, the students' families and the general school community.'

As required under the Act, social impact was considered during the extensive consultation that occurred as part of the *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools* proposal. In making the decision with regard to school closures, careful consideration was given for each school and preschool, to all issues raised by students and their families, members of the general school community and teachers, and the potential impact of the proposed closures and amalgamations on these stakeholders.

The *Towards 2020* school reforms have had a number of positive social impacts for all students. For example, if the *Towards 2020* reforms had not been undertaken schools would not have been refurbished. Declining enrolments would have continued and there would have been an overall decline in the quality of the ACT public education system.

Without the *Towards 2020* reforms, an inefficient allocation of resources would have continued. For instance, some students in the Territory would have continued to receive twice as much public funding as others, not because they had a socioeconomic or educational disadvantage, but because they attended a school such as Tharwa, Hall, Rivett or Weston.

Towards 2020 remedied this unfair funding arrangement. It provided positive social impacts for all students across the Territory such as increased investment in literacy and numeracy, more resources into pastoral care and more Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure. In addition, the *Towards 2020* reforms have enabled the ACT Government to invest further in Indigenous education, and put more resources into students with a disability. Simply, the reforms allowed the ACT Government to put funding where it was needed most and this has had significant positive social benefits for all ACT students.

The other major social impacts to be raised from the consultation period included the high value parents place on their current school of choice, the importance of the neighbourhood school, safe routes to and from school and the need to retain social capital in suburbs. Other social issues raised included the formation of social

networks for children and families, the use of a school site by community groups, the potential loss of involvement of parents and carers in school activities if a local school closed and possible loss of community services for young children and their families.

It is important to note the views of Mr Murray Bruce, Co-President of the ACT Principals' Association, in relation to consultation, during the Standing Committee hearing on 13 May 2009. "The majority of our association would think around six months was long enough. It would probably be a bit unreasonable if you wanted it shorter than that, looking particularly at the community perspective. Those factors, like seepage, demoralisation, all of that kind of thing, would be exacerbated if it was longer I think."

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Committee recommends that any mass school closures or changes to the education system on a scale of Towards 2020 should in future be taken to the electorate as an election policy in the preceding election.

Noted

All political parties should provide detailed policies, both preceding an election, and during a four-year term.

RECOMMENDATION 9

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education undertake a social impact assessment of the Towards 2020 reform process and report back to the Legislative Assembly on the findings. The social impact assessment should document the social impacts that have occurred as a consequence of the Towards 2020 implementation process and establish whether mitigation strategies deployed have been adequate.

Agreed in part

As indicated in response to Recommendation 7, social impact was considered during the extensive consultation that occurred as part of the *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools* proposal, as required by Section 20 (5) of the *Education Act 2004*.

The Government's extensive consultation process commenced with initial briefings to principals, Australian Education Union officials, the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, the Community and Public Sector Union, the Canberra Preschool Society and the non-government education sector.

School board chairs were invited to consult with principals and departmental officials about the proposal. Major stakeholders were also consulted through meetings and forums throughout the consultation period.

More than 700 meetings occurred over the six month consultation period with school communities.

During the *Towards 2020* consultation period, eight four-page regional publications entitled *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools* were distributed to school communities, key stakeholder groups and members of the broader community. These set out the current educational provision data for each of the 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 public schools and preschools and covered current enrolment numbers, projected enrolments at 2010 (based on sites open in 2006), the enrolment capacity of the school, the percentage of the school utilised, the percentage of students enrolled at each school coming from out of the area and the percentage of public school students living in the schools priority enrolment area who attended the school. These documents were, and remain, available to the community on the *Towards 2020* website.

At the end of 2006, following the announcement of the *Towards 2020* decisions, seven primary schools and three preschools closed. The 2007 and 2008 annual satisfaction surveys of staff, parents and students showed continuing high levels of satisfaction with public schooling in the ACT. Importantly, satisfaction surveys between 2005 and 2008 show that the majority of parents and carers, staff and students had increased levels of overall satisfaction, while others had remained constant across all sectors (*Department of Education and Training Annual Report 2008-09*), indicating the Government reforms of the ACT public education system have been well accepted.

Satisfaction surveys capture information from one third of schools each year as part of the school improvement cycle. It is important to note almost half of the primary schools surveyed in 2007 had enrolled students from schools or preschools that had closed at the end of 2006, with one school due to close at the end of 2007. Eight out of 10 high school and nine out of 10 primary school parents and carers expressed satisfaction with their child's education and school. School staff were also surveyed, with nine out of 10 expressing satisfaction with their workplaces in 2007.

Support classes and units in mainstream schools continue to be a part of the ACT public school landscape. Support classes and units located at closing schools were moved to neighbouring schools to ensure the continued provision of more intensive, specialised programs for students with a disability or special needs. Four of the primary schools to close at the end of 2006, also had special education programs. The 2007 special education survey results found 90 percent of parents and carers of children with a disability or special needs attending special education programs were satisfied with their child's special education program.

Community involvement in ACT public schooling continues to be strong. School communities have maintained their high level of engagement, volunteers have continued to support student learning and school improvement, and community

members have continued to be actively involved in school boards, departmental reference groups and committees and councils.

The principals and staff in all schools that closed worked closely with students and their families to assist in their move to another public school. Parents, carers and staff were consulted, supported and kept informed throughout the transition phase.

Information days for parents and carers and community members were held to assist students and their families consider the available enrolment options and to provide information and advice on the transition support processes available. Open days and nights were conducted by receiving schools. Every effort was made to minimise disruption or financial hardship to students and their families.

To further support students and families affected by school closures, the ACT Government made a significant commitment to the provision of transition assistance to support the schools renewal process. From 2006-2007, \$3.5 million over four years was allocated by the Government to ensure support to closing and receiving schools, the reallocation of special education units and other programs, and transition support payments of \$750 to the families of students affected by the school renewal process.

Further to the mitigation strategies deployed throughout the period of school closures, a number of significant benefits have been realised through reforms and investment in the ACT public education system.

Over \$239 million is being invested in new schools for the Territory. Two new schools have been completed, with \$170 million allocated for the construction of a further three schools over the next three years. Table 1 shows a breakdown of funding per school:

Table 1: Capital Expenditure – new and planned schools

Newly built schools	Year opened	Structure	Enrolment numbers (August 2009)	Cost
Harrison School (primary site)	2008	P-6	533	\$ 24.3 m
Kingsford Smith School	2009	P-7	734	\$ 45.0 m
Total cost for new schools				\$ 69.3 m
Planned schools	Proposed opening date	Structure	Capacity	Total budget
Harrison School (high school site)	2012	6-10	800	\$ 43.5 m
Gungahlin College	2011	11-12 (opening in 2011 for yr 11)	900	\$ 72.4 m
Tuggeranong P-10 School	2011	P-10 (opening in 2011 for P-7)	965	\$ 54.0 m
Total budget for planned schools				\$169.9 m
Total combined (cost & budget)				\$239.2 m

In addition, funding of \$11.9 million was provided as part of the schools infrastructure refurbishment program to re-structure four primary schools to become new, state-of-the-art early childhood schools, catering for children from birth to eight years. Additional funding of \$7.0 million was provided when the scope of the project expanded to include integrated services such as childcare facilities.

The early childhood schools are designed as regional hubs providing integrated services for children from birth to eight years and their families. Services offered will vary depending on community needs. Community coordinators have been employed at each site to liaise across agencies and ensure community needs are met.

The four new early childhood schools opened at the beginning of 2009 with strong enrolments which continue to grow.

Parents, school communities, parent associations and community groups have been actively involved in the design and development processes for all new ACT public 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, including the refurbishment design, and provided advice on the integrated services that could be offered at each site.

ACT public schools are being refurbished. There has been increased school repairs and maintenance funding of \$6 million over two years (2008-09 and 2009-10) to provide for additional maintenance of public school infrastructure on an ongoing basis. In addition, \$4 million for rainwater tanks and to install solar panels has been allocated to ensure our schools are more environmentally sustainable.

An additional \$27.7 million has been invested over four years to ensure all ACT public school students have access to state-of-the-art Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and services.

Funding of \$28 million over four years has been provided to reduce class sizes to an average of 21 across all years in primary and high schools, and to an average of 19 in colleges. In addition, funding of \$2.3 million over three years will provide additional professional staff and expert consultancy support to improve student learning outcomes by enhancing the quality of teaching in ACT public schools.

A suite of strategies aimed at improving the literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous students has been developed with the assistance of \$3.8 million allocated over four years. The strategies aim to enhance skills and develop effective ways to improve learning outcomes for students in Kindergarten to year 4, provide support to students in year 6 to transition to high school, and offer leadership for Indigenous education through professional development programs for all schools. A further \$0.6 million has also been allocated to increase the number of Indigenous teachers and teachers' assistants working in ACT public schools, through the provision of 10 scholarships available to students in years 11 and 12 who wish to pursue a career in teaching.

The focus on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for all ACT public students continues with funding of \$6.3 million over four years to allow the provision of 21 specialist literacy and numeracy teachers to coach other teachers and assist in the development of learning plans to support students who need help with literacy and numeracy.

In addition to this, funding of nearly \$1 million over four years has been allocated to provide targeted professional development to literacy and numeracy coordinators in all public schools.

\$1.7 million over four years will provide professional learning and high quality interactive software to language teachers in public primary schools. It will also provide additional resources to support the physical education and sport curriculum, and professional workshops for students and teachers in dance and drama.

The Student Welfare (Pastoral Care) Package is a significant initiative with \$17.1 million allocated over four years to provide improved pastoral care and student welfare services to students in ACT public high schools. Seventeen pastoral care

teachers have been appointed to public high schools. Achievement Centres for disengaged year 7 and 8 students were established at Canberra High School, Campbell High School and Wanniasa School in semester 2 of 2008, in addition to three alternative education programs. Since 2009 the *Connect10* program for year 9 and 10 students has been in place at Lake Tuggeranong College, Lake Ginninderra College and Dickson College. Social workers and nurses are also working in our high schools to support students.

Funding of \$17.6 million over three years has also been allocated for three new Performing Arts Theatres located at the Canberra College Woden, Calwell and Lyneham High Schools, for use by students, surrounding schools and the local communities, and \$0.9 million has been provided to assist gifted and talented students through the *In Pursuit of Excellence* program.

A social impact assessment, as indicated in Appendix E to the Committee report, is a forward-looking methodology for assessing and predicting the consequences of a proposed initiative or action before a decision is made. Conducting further social impact analysis retrospectively is not considered an appropriate use of government resources.

RECOMMENDATION 10

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government develop comprehensive, public guidelines for the conduct of public social impact assessments for any closures or amalgamations of ACT schools and similar high impact Government service decisions.

Noted

Consideration of such issues must take account of the full suite of possible impacts. The Government is currently developing a triple bottom line assessment framework, which will provide a framework in which to examine economic, environmental and social effects.

RECOMMENDATION 11

The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Training ensures that Primary School Boards with governance responsibilities for amalgamated preschools include a member of the Preschool Parents Association.

Noted

In 2008, preschools amalgamated with primary schools to become preschool to year 2, preschool to year 6, or preschool to year 10 schools. The amalgamation has resulted in each preschool becoming part of a primary school under the leadership of the primary school principal, with one financial, administrative and governance structure.

Following this amalgamation, preschool parents are able to nominate as an elected parent representative on their board. To assist in the transition, all school boards have been encouraged to nominate a preschool parent to be a board appointed nominee.

RECOMMENDATION 12

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government include, as a part of the social impact assessment to be undertaken, the effect of preschool closures on the operation and viability of playgroups in the ACT.

Noted

Social impacts were considered as part of *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools*, as required under the *Education Act 2004*.

The Departments of Education and Training (DET) and Disability, Housing and Community Services (DHCS) work closely with playgroups. The increase in the demand for preschool has resulted in an increase in demand for the use of preschool space.

The roll out of the Australian Government's Universal Access initiative, whereby children will have access to 15 hours preschool per week, is likely to see a further pressure on existing preschool space and a reduction in the capacity to accommodate playgroups.

The Universal Access initiative will ensure every child has access, by 2013, to an affordable quality early childhood education program in the year before schooling, for 15 hours per week, 40 weeks per year, taught by a four-year degree-qualified early childhood teacher, in a range of settings (public/private/community).

In 2009, the ACT has implemented 15 hours per week of preschool education in four early childhood schools and the O'Connor Cooperative School. Initial funding from the Australian Government to advance this initiative is \$1.3 million in 2008-09 and 2009-10, with increased funding in the following years (approximately \$1.2 million in 2010-11, \$3.6 million in 2011-12 and \$7 million in 2012-13).

The ACT Government's investment in preschools over recent years, especially the introduction of 12 hours access to ACT public preschools in 2006, means the ACT is well placed to support the proposed increase to 15 hours of preschool education hours across the ACT. Within the public preschool settings, teachers hold degree qualifications, facilities are of a high standard and there is capacity to expand upon the current programs within current school sites.

DET and DHCS are working closely with the ACT Playgroups Association and other government agencies to identify the short term and long term demand for space for playgroups, to allow ongoing and future planning for suitable accommodation.

DHCS is currently auditing the capacity of community halls to ensure they are suitable and affordable for playgroups requiring space in 2010. The ACT Government will support playgroups at Hall and Tharwa. (See response to Recommendation 13 below).

RECOMMENDATION 13

The Committee recommends that, based on the demographic, educational, social and economic evidence presented during the Inquiry, that the Government immediately commences the process to reopen the Hall and Tharwa Primary Schools.

Noted

In 2006, the Territory had 170 public schools – primary schools, preschools, high schools and colleges. Enrolments in ACT public schools had fallen seven percent from the period 2000-01 until 2006 and were in decline at a rate of approximately one percent per year. The public education system was under capacity by more than 30 percent.

There had been significant drops in enrolments in some schools, particularly in older suburbs where demographics had changed, while other schools and other regions were experiencing very high demand, such as schools in Gungahlin. Many schools were facing challenges such as ageing infrastructure, and combined with declining enrolments, could not be sustained.

At the same time as enrolments had fallen, education costs and expenditure increased by over 30 percent from the 2000-01 financial year. Without reform, the ACT public education system would have continued to face the same difficulties. If trends had persisted, public schooling participation would have fallen to be a minority of education provision in the Territory, catering for fewer than half of all students in the ACT.

The ACT Government accepted the challenge to renew public education. *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools* was designed to deliver a public education system that was responsive to the needs of the community. The goal was to make public education the first choice for Canberra families.

As highlighted in response to Recommendation 9, the Government's extensive consultation process commenced with initial briefings to principals, Australian Education Union officials, the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, the Community and Public Sector Union, the Canberra Preschool Society and the non-government education sector.

School board chairs were invited to consult with principals and departmental officials about the proposal. Major stakeholders were also consulted through meetings and forums throughout the consultation period.

More than 700 meetings occurred over the six month consultation period with school communities.

The decision to close Hall and Tharwa Primary Schools was made on the basis of this extensive consultation with the school communities, key stakeholders and the general community throughout 2006.

In August 2006, there were 123 enrolments at Hall and 27 at Tharwa (*August 2006 ACT Government School Census*).

Students who previously attended Hall and Tharwa Primary Schools, who enrolled in ACT public schools in 2007, have had access to high quality education and the breadth of curriculum opportunities not available in schools with low enrolment numbers.

For example, a significant proportion of students who attended Hall Primary School in 2006 relocated to Lyneham Primary School in 2007. Lyneham Primary School had a student population of 365 (*August 2006 ACT Government School Census*). At the larger Lyneham Primary School, students have access to a range of specialist teachers and extra-curricula programs that were not available at Hall Primary School.

The team of teachers at Lyneham numbered 30, supported by an administrative and assistant staff of 10 (*2006 Lyneham Primary School Annual School Board Report*). In addition, throughout the year, the school had the services of five dance teachers and nine private teachers in gymnastics and the performing arts (drama, voice, piano, strings and guitar).

The resources of a primary school the size of Lyneham allow the workload to be fairly distributed across all teachers in the school. It means, for example, the school can field sporting teams, have school bands and choirs.

In contrast, Hall Primary School had nine teaching staff in 2006 (*2006 Hall Primary School Annual School Board Report*). Release of the seven classroom teachers was provided through a session in the library with a teacher librarian and an art session with the part time art teacher. The teacher librarian and the art teacher also provided Information Literacy and ICT learning experiences for all students.

The breadth of curriculum on offer and the quality of education available to students attending a primary school the size of the former Tharwa Primary School would be even less than that of a school the size of the former Hall Primary School. The opportunities for students to access and participate in a rich curriculum in all key learning areas would be limited due to the exceptionally small size of the school and number of teaching staff.

As also indicated in the response to Recommendation 9, satisfaction surveys between 2005 and 2008 show that the majority of parents and carers, staff and students had increased levels of overall satisfaction, while others had remained

constant across all sectors (*Department of Education and Training Annual Report 2008-09*), indicating the Government reforms of the ACT public education system have been well accepted.

While the number of students affected by the *Towards 2020* changes represented approximately five percent of the total 2006 public school student population in the ACT, the benefits that have flowed from those changes have gone to 100 percent of students across the ACT.

A number of education initiatives have been implemented to enhance the range of school options and programs and infrastructure available to ACT public school students, including:

- construction of two new schools since 2006 at a cost of over \$69 million, with a further three new schools planned for construction over the next three years at a cost of almost \$170 million
- an investment of almost \$19 million in the provision of early childhood education for the Territory
- funding for school repairs and maintenance has increased by \$6 million over two years to provide for additional maintenance of public school infrastructure on an ongoing basis to ensure that a high standard of facilities continue to be available to students
- an investment of \$27.7 million over four years to ensure all ACT public school students have access to state-of-the-art ICT infrastructure and services
- funding of \$28 million over four years has been provided to reduce class sizes to an average of 21 across all years in primary and high schools, and to an average of 19 in colleges
- the continued focus on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for all ACT public students with funding of \$6.3 million over four years. This funding provides for specialist teachers to coach other teachers and assist in the development of learning plans to support students who need help with literacy and numeracy
- funding of nearly \$1 million over four years has been allocated to provide targeted professional development to literacy and numeracy coordinators in all public schools
- improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous students with the assistance of \$3.8 million over four years for the development of a suite of strategies to enhance skills and develop effective approaches to improve learning outcomes for students in Kindergarten to year 4. This funding also provides support to students in year 6 to transition to high school, and leadership for Indigenous education through professional development programs for all schools

- a further \$0.6 million has been allocated to increase the number of Indigenous teachers and teachers' assistants working in ACT public schools, through the provision of 10 scholarships available to students in years 11 and 12 who wish to pursue a career in teaching
- a funding allocation of \$1.7 million over four years to provide professional learning and high quality interactive software to language teachers in public primary schools. The funding will also provide additional resources to support the physical education and sport curriculum, and professional workshops for students and teachers in dance and drama
- the Student Welfare (Pastoral Care) Package, a significant initiative with \$17.1 million allocated over four years to provide improved pastoral care and student welfare services to students in ACT public high schools. Seventeen pastoral care teachers have been appointed to public high schools. Achievement Centres for disengaged year 7 and 8 students were established at Canberra High School, Campbell High School and Wanniasa School in semester 2 of 2008, in addition to three alternative education programs. Since 2009, the *Connect10* program for year 9 and 10 students has been in place at Lake Tuggeranong College, Lake Ginninderra College and Dickson College. Social workers and nurses are also working in our high schools to support students
- funding of \$2.3 million over three years to provide additional professional staff and expert consultancy support to improve student learning outcomes by enhancing the quality of teaching in ACT public schools
- funding of \$17.6 million over three years has also been allocated for three new Performing Arts Theatre located at the Canberra College Woden, Calwell and Lyneham High Schools, for use by students from the college, surrounding schools and the local community, and \$0.9 million has been provided to assist gifted and talented students through the *In Pursuit of Excellence* program.

Cost to re-open a school

The cost to re-open an 'average' closed primary school is up to \$2 million in the first year, depending on how much work would be needed at the school. The ongoing cost in the following years would be in the order of \$0.5 to \$0.6 million per year, depending on the number of students who re-enrol.

The first year re-opening costs would include:

- the costs of re-commissioning the school, including purchase of furniture and fittings, IT infrastructure (including connecting the school to the fibre-optic network) and any repairs to buildings or plant and equipment
- the purchase of computers, library books and other educational resources
- possible transition costs for students attending the new school such as uniform allowances or staffing support at their current school.

Ongoing costs have been calculated to include the savings generated through the closing of the school (predominantly the school based management grant and fixed staffing), as well as the potential need for additional staffing supplementation in the event only a small number of students choose to attend the re-opened school.

It should be noted re-opening schools would cause ongoing pressure on the central repairs and maintenance fund, as it would need to accommodate additional schools within current funding levels.

Schools renewal

In developing the *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools* proposal, the Government considered the needs of current students in schools but also the needs of future students. The proposal was designed to ensure the sustainability of public education until 2020 and beyond, to ensure there were a range of choices and educational options that offered specialist programs and technology, vocational education and the arts.

Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools was a difficult process. However, following on from those difficult decisions there have been significant gains for the public education system. The Government has redistributed and reinvested resources and has been able to implement a range of important initiatives such as enhancing pastoral care, enhancing Indigenous education outcomes, enhancing resources for literacy and numeracy, lowering class sizes, and investing more in the arts, languages and physical education. There have been significant gains and, for the first time in over a decade, enrolments have increased in ACT public schools.

As mentioned earlier, the enrolments at Hall and Tharwa Primary Schools before closure at the end of 2006 were 123 and 27 respectively (*August 2006 ACT Government School Census*) and projections indicated that enrolments would not increase at either school (*ACT Department of Education and Training Projected Enrolments 2006 to 2010*).

Re-opening the former Hall and Tharwa primary school sites would require at least \$8 million in known costs, including up to \$2 million at each of the former school sites up-front, plus \$4 million over four years in ongoing costs.

The Government is investing in upgrading every ACT public school, building new schools where they are most needed and providing quality educational programs for all ACT public school students. Re-opening old schools would put this at risk.

GOVERNMENT POLICY: HALL

The Government will:

- expand its support for viable early childhood settings in Hall
- work with the local community to develop a master plan for the village which supports enhanced social capital for Hall, and

- permit a registered non-government education provider to use part of the Hall site for educational purposes.

Expanded support for viable early childhood settings

These include: playgroups; preschool access for three year olds; expanded preschool hours; and access to a full time preschool program.

Playgroups

One playgroup meets at Hall on Thursdays. The Government will guarantee continued access to the site for this and any additional playgroups, and will work with the Playgroups Association to support playgroups at Hall.

Preschool access for three-year-olds

In 2009, three-year-old children were introduced to the program to supplement low enrolments. The Government will continue to allow three-year-old children to access the Hall preschool program where places remain vacant following the placement of eligible four-year-old children.

Expanded preschool hours

Commencing in 2010, the Government will fund access to 15 hours per week of preschool programs for Hall Preschool, an increase from 12 hours. (The Minister for Education and Training announced this commitment on 30 November 2009.)

Access to full-time preschool program

Commencing in 2010, if demand is sufficient, the ACT Government will support a full time preschool at Hall. A full time preschool will allow for a long-day program. To ensure a quality preschool program, the Government requires a minimum ratio of 10 children to two adults. An additional 15 enrolments (that is, a total of 25 enrolments) would enable a second program to be run on the remaining days of the week and allow for a full time qualified preschool teacher.

Three-year-old enrolments, and enrolments from New South Wales, will be included in these enrolment figures to permit a full time program.

Master plan for Hall Village

The ACT Government will undertake a master planning process in 2011-12 for Hall Village.

The master plan will include options for:

- tourism development
- increasing opportunities for small business development, and
- associated infrastructure needs.

This initiative will support enhanced social capital within the region and Hall Village.

Access for a non-government education provider

The Government will remove the restriction against a registered non-government education provider using part of the Hall site for educational purposes.

A non-government education provider would be subject to the existing registration process and would be funded according to existing Commonwealth and Territory arrangements for non-government education providers. A non-government education provider's operations could not interfere with or constrain the public preschool program. Access would also be limited to facilities not required for the public preschool program or for playgroups.

GOVERNMENT POLICY: THARWA

The Government will:

- expand its support for viable early childhood settings in Tharwa, and
- work with the local community to develop a master plan for the village which supports enhanced social capital for Tharwa.

Expanded support for viable Early Childhood settings

These include: playgroups; preschool access for three-year-olds; expanded preschool hours; and access to a full time preschool program.

Playgroups

The ACT Government will guarantee access for playgroups at Tharwa in any space not required for an expanded Tharwa Preschool, and will work with the Playgroups Association to support playgroups at Tharwa.

Preschool access for three-year-olds

The Government will now allow three-year-old children to access the Tharwa preschool program where places remain vacant following the placement of eligible four-year-old children.

Expanded preschool hours

Commencing in 2011, the Government will fund access to 15 hours per week of preschool programs at Tharwa, an increase from 12 hours.

Access to full time preschool program

Commencing in 2010, if demand is sufficient, the Government will support a full time preschool at Tharwa. The program currently utilises one half of the space available, and the existing space is suitable to two preschool groups, should this be required.

A full time preschool will allow for a long-day program. To ensure a quality preschool program, the Government requires a minimum ratio of 10 children to two adults. An additional 15 enrolments (that is, a total of 25 enrolments) would enable a second

program to be run on the remaining days of the week and allow for a full time qualified preschool teacher.

Three-year-old enrolments will be included in these enrolment figures to permit a full time program.

Master plan for Tharwa Village

The ACT Government will undertake a master planning process in 2011-12 for Tharwa Village.

The master plan will include options for:

- tourism development
- expanded village-style residential land development, and
- associated infrastructure needs.

This initiative will support enhanced social capital within the region and Tharwa Village.

RECOMMENDATION 14

The Committee recommends that data about school capacity be regularly reviewed by the Department of Education and Training and provided to each government school and the school community for endorsement. Where this data is disputed by the school or the community of interest, an independent review process should be established to resolve perceived discrepancies to the satisfaction of the school and the Department of Education and Training.

Noted

The Department of Education and Training currently reviews school capacity annually. School enrolment data is reviewed twice yearly and published in the ACT School Census in February and August of each year. The data is subject to intensive scrutiny and is audited for accuracy. Schools also provide audited enrolment data to their communities via the School Board Annual Report.

Where enrolment pressures are identified, Department of Education and Training central office staff work with the relevant school principal to ensure priority enrolment area (PEA) enrolments can be accommodated.

In making decisions about regional planning and when and where to open new schools, demographic data from the ACT Demographer in the ACT Chief Minister's Department is used in conjunction with population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and current ACT School Census data.

With these data review activities already in place, the establishment of an independent review process to resolve possible perceived discrepancies in the data by a school or community of interest is unnecessary.

As mentioned in the response to Recommendation 9, during the *Towards 2020* consultation period, eight four-page regional publications entitled *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools* were distributed to school communities, key stakeholder groups and members of the broader community. These set out the educational provision data for each of the educational regions of Canberra: Gungahlin, Belconnen North West, Belconnen South East, North Canberra, South Canberra, Weston Creek, Woden and Tuggeranong.

RECOMMENDATION 15

The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Training undertake, and make publicly available, research on the educational outcomes for students relocated in ACT public schools as a consequence of the Towards 2020 restructure.

Not agreed

The educational progress of individual students is monitored at the school level and communicated to parents and carers on a regular basis. Individual student outcomes are a matter for parents, carers, students and teachers involved. They are not a matter for the general public. Implementing this recommendation may breach students' privacy.

Furthermore, the number of students at each year level who relocated in ACT public schools as a consequence of the *Towards 2020* restructure is very small from a statistical perspective. Any collation and analysis of the data will result in a very high standard of errors which will make the results statistically meaningless. That is, there would be no measurable difference in the outcomes for students from closed schools compared with students in schools that remain open.