



**Comment
On
Legislative
Assembly Inquiry
into school closures
and reform of the
ACT education
system**

April 2009

INTRODUCTION

ACTCOSS acknowledges that Canberra is built on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. We pay our respects to their elders and recognise the displacement and disadvantage they have suffered since European settlement. ACTCOSS celebrates the Ngunnawal's living culture and valuable contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage, and low-income citizens of the Territory. ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' objectives are representation of people living with disadvantage, the promotion of equitable social policy, and the development of a dynamic, collaborative and sustainable community sector.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS receives funding from the Community Services Program (CSP) which is funded by the ACT Government.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

Introduction

In this submission, ACTCOSS builds on some of the issues outlined in comment provided regarding *Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools*, in November 2006.¹ The extent of community concern that was generated throughout the *Towards 2020* consultation process was indicative that the process was significantly flawed. It also left many in the community unconvinced about the need for such a large-scale restructure of the ACT school system.

However, this submission does not attempt to address all of the terms of reference for the Assembly Inquiry and does not revisit the decisions arising from *Towards 2020*. Rather it describes general concerns with the process, considers the potential impact of the *Education Amendment Bill 2008*, and the future use of the facilities of schools that are closed.

The *Towards 2020* policy: Demographic factors influencing regional planning in the delivery of educational services

ACTCOSS raised a number of concerns regarding the *Towards 2020* consultation document, stemming from our focus on ensuring the needs of people experiencing social and economic disadvantage are addressed.

In terms of demographic factors, the consultation document made no mention of socio-economic differences among school populations. Nor was there any discussion of the impact of the proposals on people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

In comment on the consultation paper, ACTCOSS highlighted that people with few resources have the least capacity to adapt to change. This is both in terms of meeting the travel and other costs of sending their children to a different school, and in the emotional adjustment of such a major change at a time when they may be experiencing a range of other family stresses.

As well as providing access to schooling at minimal cost for families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, local schools give all families an opportunity to strengthen community ties. This is likely to be significantly more important for families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, whose opportunities to develop community connections are fewer than for other groups. Schools remain a significant contributor to achieving the objective of social inclusion.

At a broader level, while demographic data was provided in *Towards 2020*, its use gave the strong impression that school closures and amalgamations were the result of a desire to rationalise the configuration of schools in the interests of economy. Such views about the rationale for the restructure was strengthened by the fact that the report of the

¹ ACTCOSS (2006), *Comment on 'Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools'*.

Strategic and Functional Review, which was reported to provide the basis for this major reform, was not made public.

If the restructure was indeed driven by economic imperatives, it may have been preferable for the Government to outline these in the discussion paper, and to indicate a range of options for how to respond to these financial circumstances.

Configuration of school environments and educational outcomes

With the focus on small enrolments in *Towards 2020*, there seemed to be an assumption that small schools are undesirable. While the diseconomies of small schools cannot be discounted, neither was there evidence that other factors which might support the continuation of particular small schools were given due weight.

The consultation paper provided for a very wide range of school configurations. For example, there were references to P-2, P-3, P-5, P-6, P-10, P-12, 6-10, and 11-12 schools. *Towards 2020* outlined the advantages of the various configurations, but it was not clear why a particular configuration was chosen in particular locations. In particular, the educational rationale for particular configurations was not made clear. In the circumstances the Canberra community might conclude that the main rationale was the desire to ensure that schools were of an economically manageable size.

ACTCOSS is not in a position to offer an evidence based view on the benefits or otherwise of having a significant variety of school configurations available in Canberra. However, some diversity and variety is no doubt to be valued. From a practical viewpoint, the extent of the diversity may pose problems for families who move from one suburb to another, in that their children may find they have to adapt to a different school configuration in a new location. In such circumstances, the disruption experienced by children in transferring between suburbs and schools may be magnified.

Review of the consultation process

A fundamental flaw of the overall consultation process was that such a major proposal to restructure education provision across the ACT was developed without more formative community consultation. The consultation paper presented the community with a document that, for the most part, was couched in terms of decisions having already been made. A striking example of this was the paper's references to the closure of specific schools, including the relevant dates. This approach gave a very strong impression the restructure was all but a 'done deal', and it would be very difficult to bring about a change of approach in individual cases.

In a small number of instances for particular localities, *Towards 2020* outlined options for future school arrangements. This was a more open and appropriate approach. ACTCOSS is of the view the consultation process would have been less stressful for all concerned if such a strategy had been applied throughout the document. The consultation document could also have provided a more balanced overview of the impact of the changes on each region – both positive and negative – and clearly linked these impacts with any options proposed.

The *Education Amendment Bill 2008*

In principle, ACTCOSS supports the provisions of the *Education Amendment Bill 2008*. The Bill provides for a more reasonable time frame for community consultation about any proposal to close or amalgamate a school. It requires an independent cost-benefit analysis of a comprehensive range of impacts – educational, environmental, financial and social – of closing or amalgamating a school, as well as an explanation to the school community on how its views were taken into account in reaching a final decision. It also provides for a wide definition of 'school community' which is more in keeping with current community values.

The Bill addresses many of the shortcomings of the process that was followed in the *Towards 2020* consultation. ACTCOSS acknowledges the proposed arrangements will result in a longer period of uncertainty for any school community that comes to be considered for closure or amalgamation. However this situation is unavoidable and is preferable to a process that is truncated and less than comprehensive. In particular, it would help to ensure that both the local and wider Canberra community are assured that a fair and objective process has been followed.

New uses for school facilities

Schools, along with their associated green spaces and playing fields represent a major community asset. They provide a locus for a sense of community, as a venue for community activities, including sporting and other recreation activities. It is important, therefore, that the buildings and associated facilities and grounds of schools that are closed should be retained as community space for community use.

The opportunity should be taken to cater for a mixture of uses. Where school buildings need to have work done so that they are adapted for new purposes, this should be done in such a way that they may be readily altered or reconfigured to meet future needs.

It is also important that the green spaces – playgrounds and sports ovals – associated with these schools should be retained and maintained for community recreation and amenity.