



**Comment**

**on**

**Towards 2020:  
Renewing our  
Schools**

**November  
2006**

**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.

# **ACTCOSS comment on Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools**

## **Introduction**

Of all the changes resulting from the ACT Government's 2006-07 Budget, the changes to the school education system, as outlined in the Towards 2020 consultation document, have attracted the greatest public attention and concern. While ACTCOSS holds deep reservations about the proposal, these have already been discussed far more comprehensively by others with a more detailed understanding of the issues, and our comments here will be relatively brief.

As with many of the proposals outlined in the Budget, the genesis of the Towards 2020 proposal (the proposal) appears to have been the Strategic and Functional Review. As this document remains confidential, it is difficult to critique its analysis, or the process involved in determining its recommendations. Similarly, the exact details of how the broad parameters and available data behind Towards 2020 were translated into a specific plan for closing, restructuring and amalgamating certain schools is similarly unclear. It remains problematic to ask for public acceptance for a radical and extensive proposal when the full details leading to its creation are unavailable.

Of greatest concern to ACTCOSS are the implications for children living in families with low-incomes or experiencing disadvantage. We understand, from the diffuse and incomplete data available, that changes requiring students to relocate prematurely to another school will disproportionately affect students from low socio-economic backgrounds and disadvantaged groups. We are unable to support a proposal that disproportionately places the burden of dislocation upon those least able to accommodate it.

## **Socio-economic disadvantage**

From the outset, there appears to have been little consideration of the differential impacts of any plan to 'rationalise' the ACT schools system. The Towards 2020 consultation document makes no mention of socio-economic differences in school populations, and while the Department of Education and Training (the Department) has regularly updated the consultation website, there is still no information on these aspects of the proposal. Similarly, the aspects that were considered in developing the proposal, as listed on the website, omit any discussion of social disadvantage. ACTCOSS would advocate that this and any future proposals for restructuring school education should explicitly consider these issues.

ACTCOSS would point out that, in general, those with the fewest resources have the least capacity to adapt to change. In general, low socio-economic families are more likely to use government schools, and we understand that they are also more likely to send their children to the nearest school rather than one outside their local area. Closure of a local school may increase travel costs for this group, and reduce the opportunity for walking to school in a demographic that has fewer opportunities to participate in structured sport due to cost. The emotional adjustment for these students and their families is also likely to be more difficult, as they are likely to already experience a range of additional family stresses.

ACTCOSS notes the increasing propensity for high and middle-income families to send their children to private schools. We also recognise that the government has stated its belief that the increased investment in facilities accompanying Towards 2020 will assist in combating this trend. ACTCOSS would generally welcome strategies that help ensure that government schools retain a social mix, allowing students to experience a diversity of social contacts. However, we also note that if this strategy fails, then the result may be a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in larger schools, which is unlikely to result in improved outcomes.

ACTCOSS also notes that many of the schools proposed to close or merge have numerous special programs addressing specific groups of disadvantaged children, including children with disabilities and indigenous children. We understand that these issues have been considered in the development of the proposals and it is envisaged that in the case of school closures, the programs will be moved to another school. However, feedback has suggested that the disruption will cause detriment to the children involved, and the cohesion and implementation of the programs will suffer.

Perhaps most significantly, schools are an important site of social interaction and provide important places to encourage social inclusion. Schools are frequently characterised as the heart of a suburban community, where a range of social networks, friendships and collective activities are formed and maintained. The sudden loss of these connections will particularly affect those who face disadvantage in our community.

## **Scale, timing and consultation**

ACTCOSS also raises concerns about the scale and timing of the proposal. A great deal of the negative reaction to the proposal results from the radical and extensive changes proposed, to be completed in extremely short time-frames. While the *Education Act 2004* specifies a 6 month consultation period for the closure of a single school, it would seem rational that a system-wide and drastic change would require considerably longer for adequate information to be disseminated and involvement to occur. In addition, there is much concern at the inherently top-down approach taken by the Department, where a large-scale, detailed proposal was developed with virtually no consultation or collaboration.

ACTCOSS advises that the resultant adversarial stance of many schools and the wider community was entirely predictable, due both to the lack of community involvement, and the overwhelming sense that the purpose of the proposal is to cut costs rather than improve educational outcomes. While the Department has gathered evidence providing some pedagogical support for the proposal, this is generally perceived as having been peripheral to the decision-making process.

ACTCOSS would also refer the Department to the ACT Government Community Engagement Manual, which details the range of strategies that could be utilised to facilitate community collaboration in decision-making. In particular, ACTCOSS expresses concern that the documents do not detail how the broad parameters were translated into the final proposal, especially how and why particular schools were chosen for closure and not others. ACTCOSS would emphasise that the focus of consultation should be to involve communities in decision-making, not to "sell" a predetermined decision.