

# **A High Quality, Low Equity and Socially Segregated School System**

## **Address to the ACT Public Education Alliance Forum on the Future of Public Education**

**27 March 2008**

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...the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania are classed as high quality/low equity. [PISA 2006 study, p. x]

### **1. Introduction**

When addressing the future of public education in the ACT a fundamental step is to review its broad achievements and key weaknesses and develop approaches to overcome the perceived weaknesses. This presentation reviews broad outcomes across both government and private schools. The findings have implications for both sectors.

The presentation makes 4 points:

- The ACT schools system has very high quality outcomes, with little difference between the government and private sectors, especially when the different social composition of the sectors is taken into account.
- A significant weakness is that outcomes are not improving and, indeed, have declined in some areas over the period of the Stanhope Government.
- There is extensive individual and social inequity in ACT school outcomes with a large achievement gap between students from low and high income families.
- There is increasing social segregation in the ACT school system that is reflected in the ongoing drift of enrolments to the private system.

The final section canvasses some broad policy proposals to address key weaknesses in the school system.

The new ACER report on student performance in the ACT released this week was commissioned by the Minister in response to previous SOS analysis published in the Canberra Times. The new report confirms the SOS analysis on the large achievement gaps between high and low SES students in ACT schools and actually strengthens the case.

### **2. High quality education outcomes**

- The ACT school system has very high quality outcomes by international and national standards. High quality outcomes are evidenced by:
  - High average outcomes in international assessments for 15 year old, Year 8 and Year 4 students;

- High proportions of students performing at the most advanced levels in international assessments, except in Year 8;
  - High proportions of students are above national benchmarks for reading, writing and numeracy in Years 3, 5 and 7;
  - Very high retention and completion rates to Year 12.
- There is strong high level achievement by ACT students. The ACT has high proportions of students achieving at the top levels in reading, mathematics and science in international and national assessments.
    - However, there is a weakness in Year 8 in mathematics and science.
  - There are relatively low levels of learning need in the ACT. The ACT has low proportions of students achieving at the lowest levels in reading, mathematics and science in international and national assessments.
  - There is very little difference between academic results of government and private schools:
    - The mean aggregate scores for students receiving a Tertiary Education Statement are similar in the private and government school sectors;
    - Government schools are doing very well in comparison with private schools when the difference in the social composition of schools is taken into account;
    - Anecdotal evidence from ACT universities is that government school students do very well at university.

### **3. Outcomes are not improving, but have declined in some areas**

- Average reading literacy performance amongst ACT 15 year-old students declined between 2000 and 2006, with a large decline between 2003 and 2006:
  - The decline is the equivalent of 6 months of schooling.
- There was no significant change in mathematics for 15 year-old students between 2003 and 2006.
- The proportion of ACT 15 year-old students achieving at the top levels in reading and mathematics has declined in recent years:
  - For example, in reading it declined from 25 to 16%.
- The proportion of 15 year-old students achieving at the bottom levels in reading has increased since 2000 and there has been no reduction in the proportion at these levels in mathematics.
- The proportion of ACT students achieving above the national benchmarks in reading, writing and numeracy did not improve between 2001 and 2006, although there are instances of improvement and decline.
- Retention rates in ACT government schools are lower now than in 2001 and the preceding years, but this is at least partially due to an expansion to Years 11 and 12 by some private schools.

- The number of ACT students who receive a Year 12 certificate as a proportion of the estimated number of students that could attend Year 12 has not improved in recent years.
- There has been no improvement in the proportion of ACT students beginning Year 11 who receive a Year 12 Certificate over the last 10 years or more, in either the government or private sectors.
- So, at best, outcomes in the ACT school system have been standing still for many years and not improving. This does raise serious questions about the effectiveness of additional education expenditure in the ACT since 2000.

#### **4. Large achievement gap in education outcomes**

- ACT 15 year-old students in the lowest SES category are 2 to 3 years behind students in the highest SES category in reading, mathematics and science.
- The ACT has the largest achievement gaps in Australia, apart from the NT, between the average scores of low and high SES students in reading, mathematics and science. For example, in science:

The [socio-economic] gradient for the Northern Territory is the steepest, with the Australian Capital Territory almost as steep, while Victoria has the flattest. [PISA 2006 study, p. 229]

- There are also large gaps between the proportion of low SES and high SES students in the ACT who achieve below the OECD mean in reading and science.
- Despite the claims of the Minister for Education, low SES students in the ACT are doing no better than their counterparts in the rest of Australia:
  - The ACER report shows that the socio-economic gradient for the ACT meets that of other states in reading, mathematics and science at the low SES end, which indicates that low SES students in the ACT are doing no better than low SES students in several states;
  - The proportion of low SES students in the ACT achieving below or above the OECD mean is statistically similar to the average for Australia, that is, the ACT is doing no better.
- The achievement gaps between low and high SES students in the ACT do not appear to be declining, but it is very hard to make definite judgements.
- A large proportion of students drop-out of school before completing Year 12 and national and international research indicates that it is students from low income families who are much more likely to drop-out of school before completing Year 12 than high income students.
  - Over 20 per cent of the ACT student-age population who could attend Year 12 each year do not complete Year 12;
  - Approximately 15% of each Year 10 cohort in government schools does not enrol in Year 11 and about 20% of each Year 11 cohort does not complete Year 12. This means that about 1000 students in any cohort do not complete Year 12.

- There are several reasons why we should be worried about the social inequity in school outcomes:
  - Some social groups are consistently discriminated against in providing opportunities for rewarding livelihoods and successful participation in adult society. It means that students from more privileged backgrounds have greater access to higher incomes, higher status occupations and positions of wealth, influence and power in society than students from more disadvantaged backgrounds;
  - The ACT Government is a signatory to the National Goals for Schooling which includes a social equity goal to reduce differences in school outcomes arising from students' socio-economic background. It requires that the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students and Indigenous students match those of other students;
  - Employer organisations in the ACT are concerned about skill shortages in the workforce. Reducing the achievement gap in school outcomes would assist in alleviating these shortages;
  - The large disparity in school outcomes indicates a waste of talents, skills and resources. It is, in effect, a measure of the potential to improve workforce skills and productivity.
- Reducing the achievement gap is the most important challenge facing the ACT school system.

## **5. Extensive social segregation in ACT schools**

- There is significant social segregation in the ACT education system. ABS Census data shows government schools have higher proportions of students from low income families while Catholic and Independent schools have higher proportions of students from high income families:
  - About 75% of Independent school enrolments and 65% of Catholic school enrolments are from high income families, compared to 49% in government schools;
  - In contrast, 24% of government school enrolments are from low income families compared to 13% of Catholic school enrolments and 10% of Independent school enrolments.
- Social segregation in the ACT school system has increased over the past 15 years:
  - Since 1991, the proportion of students in low income families relative to the proportion of students in high income families has increased in ACT government primary and secondary schools;
  - In contrast, there was a decline in the proportion of students in low income families relative to the proportion of students in high income families in private schools.
- The increasing social segregation in schools reflects the drift of enrolments to private schools. It is higher income families who are choosing private schools.
- There is significant social segregation within the government school sector:
  - 15 primary schools and 4 secondary schools had 40 per cent or more of their students ranked as relatively disadvantaged by a ranking measure used to

determine School Equity Fund schools, while 23 primary schools and 3 secondary schools had 20 per cent or less of their students ranked as disadvantaged.

- There are several reasons to be concerned about the growing social segregation in ACT schools:
  - Socially segregated schools have unequal resources:
    - Low SES schools generally have less income than high SES schools;
    - Low SES schools have less real resources because they have higher levels of learning need and other burdens associated with disadvantage;
    - Low SES schools often have less qualified, less experienced teachers, and high staff turnover;
  - Social segregation in schools leads to lower average outcomes. International research studies show that high concentrations of students from low SES and other disadvantaged backgrounds reduce student outcomes beyond that attributable to individual student backgrounds. There is a composition effect on student outcomes;
  - Social segregation in schools is associated with large disparities in student outcomes between schools. Educational outcomes in low SES schools tend to be lower in terms of test scores, retention rates and university admission rates. As a result, schools with high proportions of low SES schools often wear a badge of inferiority that has nothing to do with the quality of the school;
  - In the longer term, social segregation in schools breeds social intolerance in communities and workplaces and undermines social understanding and cohesion. Social segregation in schools is socially divisive.
- Improving social diversity in ACT schools is a key challenge facing the system.

## **6. Improving social equity and diversity in education**

- Reducing the achievement gap by improving outcomes for the bottom half of students is the most fundamental challenge facing ACT education:
  - The key to change is bi-partisan acknowledgement that this is the most important policy priority for ACT education.
- Reducing the achievement gap is also a factor in maintaining social diversity in government schools.
  - The ACT Government's bricks and mortar approach to making government schools more attractive for higher income families is wasting considerable resources that would be better devoted to reducing the achievement gap.
- The first step is to formulate a comprehensive strategic plan to reduce the achievement gap. The general focus could be on improving outcomes for the bottom 30 per cent of students.
- Need to look at how other countries such as Finland achieve high quality and high equity outcomes. They have:
  - Highly qualified teachers;
  - Quick identification of students falling behind;
  - Intensive individual and small group work with those who fall behind;

- Teachers' assistants to work with those who fall behind;
  - Specialist learning needs teachers;
  - Systematic collaboration between teachers in schools;
  - Multi-disciplinary teams including social workers and health professionals;
  - Small schools (eg, <300 students in primary schools) and small class sizes (20-30 students);
  - A system for keeping teachers with the same group of students for several years;
  - Extensive teacher training in the classroom with mentors and training for teaching students performing at different levels;
  - No merit pay;
  - No naming and shaming schools by league tables of school results.
- Finland has about the same per capita expenditure per student as Australia, and so is lower than the ACT, but achieves higher equity in student outcomes. It uses its resources more effectively.
  - Increase funding directed at reducing the gap and revise school funding allocation to increase the 'needs' component.
    - The difference between per capita expenditure on the least disadvantaged students and the most disadvantaged students in government schools in the ACT is about the smallest in Australia and is less than half that in most other states.
  - Selective use of small class sizes where learning need is highest (it is too costly to pursue general reductions in class sizes, especially where average outcomes are already high).
  - Teacher training/professional development program in teaching high need students.
  - More special learning needs teachers and teacher assistants to support small group work with students who have fallen behind.
  - Reduced time in front of class for planning and collaboration. This is a real productivity increase.
  - Multi-disciplinary teams in schools consisting of teachers, counsellors, social workers, health professionals and other social welfare professionals to assist students who have fallen behind:
    - Full service schools;
    - Expand Schools as Communities program.
  - Individual student learning and development plans for those who have fallen behind.
  - Individual school plans to reduce the achievement gap in each school.