

Submission on Applications for New Private Schools in the ACT

Save Our Schools

April 2012

<http://www.saveourschools.com.au>

Recommendations

Save Our Schools recommends that the Minister for Education not give in-principle approval for:

1. The proposed new campus of Brindabella Christian College in Charnwood because it did not provide concrete evidence of potential enrolments and because it would have a significant impact on existing schools in North-West Belconnen, particularly Charnwood PS.
2. The proposed new campus of the Canberra Christian School in Molonglo because it did not provide concrete evidence of potential enrolments and because school infrastructure planning in the region is at an early stage.
3. The proposed new Islamic School if it is to be located in Belconnen because it would have a significant impact on existing schools in the region.

1. The applications

This submission responds to three new applications for private schools in Canberra. Two are for new campuses of existing schools - Brindabella Christian College and Canberra Christian School – and one is for a new school - At Taqwa Islamic School.

Brindabella Christian College

Brindabella Christian College is located in Lyneham and is seeking in-principle approval to open a new campus in Charnwood on the site of the old Charnwood HS. Initially, the campus will be a K-4 school associated with the Early Learning Centre and pre-school which opened on the site this year. The K-4 school is due to open on 28 January 2014. Eventually it will be a K-12 campus. The college will apply separately for in-principle approval for extension to other year levels.

The planned enrolment for the K-12 school at Charnwood is 650 students. The initial K-4 enrolment in 2014 is planned to be 75 and expanding to 194 in 2018. Extension to Year 6 will include an additional 50 students.

Canberra Christian School

Canberra Christian School is located in Mawson and is seeking in-principle approval for a new campus in Molonglo because there is not enough land at Mawson to expand. The suburb in Molonglo where the school is to be located is not stated. Initially, it will be a K-6 school to open on 30 January 2015. It is planned for the school to expand to a K-12 school.

The K-6 campus is planned for 480 students. Years 7-8 are planned to open in 2017 with 270 students. The planned enrolment for the K-12 school is 813 students by 2028.

At Taqwa Islamic School

The new Islamic School is proposed to be located in Gungahlin or Belconnen. It will be operated by Canberra Muslim Youth in partnership with the Islamic Society of Belconnen. Initially it will be a K-4 school, but will expand to Year 10 by 2017. The proposed opening date is 6 February 2014.

The K-4 school will have 65 students on opening. It is proposed that the school will expand to approximately 880 students by 2022.

2. Requirements for in-principle approval

Under the ACT Education Act, in deciding whether to give in-principle approval for a new school or a campus of a new school, the Minister must have regard to:

- Whether it would undermine the viability of other existing schools; and
- The demand for the school/campus including the level of registration of interest shown by the community.

These are the only criteria that the Minister must have regard to. There are no criteria about providing additional choice, diversity of schools, serving particular religious beliefs or any other matter.

The application form for in-principal approval requires supporting documentation on several matters. In particular, it requires documentation on evidence of community demand and information to assess impact on existing schools.

Evidence of community support includes:

- Detail of the interest shown by the community for the campus/school and the method used to obtain this evidence;
- Analysis of the community support in terms of the need for the development of the proposal;
- Letters of support from community leaders, community organisations, church or religious affiliation; and
- Information on the current schools and year levels of identified prospective children.

Information is also required on consultation about the proposed school/campus. It should include a list of government, community and stakeholder consultation undertaken and a description of planned consultation. It should also include a list of issues arising from consultation, differentiating those issues already addressed and by what means from those to be addressed.

Applicants are required to provide enrolment projections and population trends for a ten-year period. They should:

- Detail the main catchment areas by district and analyse school aged children for each catchment district;
- Analyse the target enrolment audience by district and the anticipated percentage seeking enrolment; and
- Analyse the projected enrolment for each year level including peak capacity and long term capacity of the campus.

3. Evidence of community demand

Brindabella Christian College

Little evidence is provided by the College to support its claims about community demand for a new campus in Belconnen. The only evidence provided is letters of support from Christian Schools Australia, Vicki Dunne MLA, Canberra Christian Life Centre, Northpointe (Baptist Church), Brindabella Christian College P&F and 2 parents who would enrol their children in the school. There is no detail of the interest shown by the community or evidence about prospective students. No waiting list of potential students is provided. There is no discussion of what existing schools prospective students might come from. It only cites growth in private school enrolments in Canberra as evidence of demand.

The application states that it has consulted by community meetings, P&F meetings, and enrolment interviews. It says there is a “ground swell of support” but no evidence is provided of this support. Details are not provided of the number of meetings or the number of people involved.

The College will likely to be dependent on its Early Learning Centre and pre-school to provide the basis of its enrolments. However, the licensed capacity of the Early Learning Centre is only 67 places and separate figures for pre-school enrolments in 2012 are not provided. This will not be sufficient to sustain a K-4 or K-6 school of a viable size.

Canberra Christian School

Little evidence is provided by the school to support its claims about community demand for a new campus in Belconnen. No waiting list of potential students is provided. The only evidence of community demand is letters of support from Christian Schools Australia, Adventist Schools Australia, Adventist Schools (Greater Sydney) and 2 parents with children enrolled at the Mawson campus and two past students. There is no detail of the interest

shown by the community or evidence about prospective students. There is no discussion of what existing schools prospective students might come from. Also, no evidence is provided about community consultation.

At Taqwa Islamic School

The application includes expressions of support from families with approximately 180 children. Names and addresses are supplied. It says that the support was gained at community meetings. Letters of support from religious, community or other organisations are not provided. The application states that Muslim organisations have been consulted. It also nominates schools in the Belconnen/Gungahlin area that children will come from.

The expressions of support from families suggest that the school has reasonable prospects of achieving a K-6 school of similar size to the other Islamic school in Weston.

4. Impact on existing schools

Brindabella Christian College

The location of a new school in Charnwood will have a significant impact on existing schools in the area. In all likelihood, it will draw off enrolments from existing schools in Charnwood and the broader North-West Belconnen region. Schools in the region have sufficient capacity to cater for the projected enrolments of Brindabella Christian College.

The proposed location of Brindabella College in the former Charnwood High School is within several hundred metres of two existing primary schools – St Thomas Aquinas (a Catholic systemic school) and Charnwood PS (a government school). At present, Charnwood PS has 285 enrolments (excluding pre-school enrolments) with a school capacity of 450 (excluding pre-school capacity). Its capacity utilisation is only 63%. St Thomas Aquinas is not oversubscribed.

In 2006, Charnwood PS was proposed for partial closure by the ACT Government because it had only 170 enrolments. Flynn PS, which was just over a kilometre away from the proposed location of Brindabella College, was closed in 2006 because it had only 179 enrolments. In both cases, excess capacity in the region was given as one of the reasons by the ACT Government for these two schools being considered for closure. It is likely that Charnwood PS could face the same threat again if it loses enrolments to the new private school.

Charnwood is one of the most disadvantaged suburbs in Canberra according to the Social Overview of the ACT published by the Department of Chief Minister and Cabinet (<http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/policystrategic/actstats/demographicprojects>). It has the highest proportion of low income families in the region. While it is not expected that all prospective enrolments at Brindabella College will come from Charnwood PS, it is likely that at least some of those families who can afford a private education will leave Charnwood for the new school.

The establishment of a new primary school campus is also likely to impact on other schools in the region and could affect their viability if the ACT Government continues to use excess capacity and low enrolments as reasons to close schools. According to Brindabella College's application, students are likely to come from suburbs in the North-West Belconnen region (and elsewhere), and so draw enrolments from existing schools.

If the ACT Government continues to use excess capacity as a criterion to consider the future viability of schools, other schools in the region could come under threat if the application of Brindabella College is approved. There are nearly 2,000 excess places in the North-West Belconnen area and average capacity utilisation is only 69% [see Attachment table]. There are 899 excess places in government primary schools and average capacity utilisation is 78%.

There are already seven private schools in Belconnen that offer a Christian education for primary school students, including three in the North-West Belconnen region.

Projected population growth in Belconnen is not sufficient to expect that schools in the region will operate at close to capacity in the future. The projected population growth to 2021 in the Belconnen regions is very low – 0.3% per annum compared to the ACT average of 1.4% according to the ACT Districts and Suburbs Population Projections published on the Chief Minister and Cabinet website (<http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/policystrategic/actstats/projections/suburbs>).

It should be noted that the previous Minister for Education, Andrew Barr, closed schools in 2006 because of excess capacity in North-West Belconnen. He rejected an application for a new campus of a school in West Belconnen in 2008 for the same reason, stating that it could undermine the viability of existing schools in the Belconnen region. There has been little change in capacity utilisation in primary schools in the region since this decision.

A new private school in the region would represent a reversal of ACT Government policy. It would mean the replacement of a government school (Flynn PS) by a private school.

Canberra Christian School

There are no existing schools in the Molonglo Valley, so it is not possible to assess the likely impact of approving the Canberra Christian School campus. Planning for the Molonglo Valley is still underway and only two suburbs are being developed as part of Stage 1.

The Molonglo and North Weston structure plan states that at least five government schools are planned for the region [p.9]. It does not state how many private schools are planned. The Coombs and Wright suburbs comprise Stage 1 of the plan and these suburbs are currently being developed. The Coombs and Wright Concept Plan provides for a school in each suburb. It states that a primary school is planned for Coombs [p.5], but does not state the level of school planned for Wright. Stage 2 of the development is currently being planned according to the ACTPLA website and plans for future schools do not appear to be available as yet.

The two schools planned for Coombs and Wright should be government primary schools. There are four private schools nearby – two in Holder and two in Weston. There is only one government school in the region, which is in Duffy. Two other public schools (Rivett PS and Weston PS) were closed in the area as part of the Towards 2020 plan. Duffy PS is operating at capacity; its capacity is 375 students and has 367 enrolled in 2012 so it will not be able to take overflow from Coombs and Wright of children from families wishing to choose a government school.

It would be entirely premature to give in-principle approval for the initial stage of a large K-12 private school in the Molonglo Valley region before school infrastructure planning has been completed. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive that a site could be allocated to Canberra Christian School in time for it to open in 2015 given the current stage of planning for the

region. Therefore, in-principle approval for the new campus of Canberra Christian School should not be given.

At Taqwa Islamic School

If the Islamic School is to be located in Belconnen, similar impact considerations apply as in the case of Brindabella Christian College. There is significant excess capacity in the region which could cater for the projected enrolments of the proposed primary school.

If the Islamic School is located in Gungahlin the impact on existing government and private schools would be much lower. Government and private schools in the region are all close to or over designed capacity. Over-capacity in government schools is being catered for with portable classrooms until peak enrolments decline. It is noted that the projected population growth for Gungahlin for 2009 to 2021 is high at 4.9% per annum.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Neither Brindabella Christian College nor Canberra Christian School have provided concrete evidence of community support to meet their projected enrolments as required by the application form. In contrast, At Taqwa Islamic School provided an extensive list of families indicating expressions of interest in the proposed new school.

The opening of a new campus of Brindabella Christian College in Charnwood would have a significant impact on the continued viability of government schools in the North-West Belconnen region, particularly Charnwood PS, if the ACT Government continues to use excess capacity and low enrolments as reasons to close schools. Charnwood was listed for possible closure in 2006 but since then it has been able to increase its enrolments and capacity utilisation, due largely to population increases in the Charnwood-Dunlop area. There is already one existing private school in Charnwood and six others in Belconnen. If further government schools were to close as a result of Brindabella College opening, the choices of families in one of the most disadvantaged suburbs in Canberra would be significantly reduced.

The 2012 ACT school census brought the welcome news that ACT government school enrolments were increasing and, for the first time, drawing students away from the private sector. The new Minister for Education, Chris Burke, was rightly proud of this achievement, saying “the results were a win for government schools” (*Canberra Times* 16 April, p. 2). It is unlikely that opening a private school within a few hundred metres of an existing government school and within kilometres of a government school closed only a few years earlier would see continued wins in future years.

A similar impact on existing schools could be expected if the proposed Islamic School was opened in the Belconnen region. However, the impact is likely to be considerably less if it opens in Gungahlin where schools are close to or over capacity and where the projected population growth is high.

There are no existing schools in the Molonglo Valley, so it is impossible to assess the likely impact of the Canberra Christian School campus. Planning for the Molonglo Valley is still underway and only two suburbs are being developed as part of Stage 1. It would be entirely premature to give in-principle approval for the initial stage of a large K-12 private school in the Molonglo Valley region before school infrastructure planning has been completed.

Therefore, Save Our Schools recommends that the Minister for Education not give in-principle approval for:

1. The proposed new campus of Brindabella Christian College in Charnwood because it did not provide concrete evidence of potential enrolments and because it would have a significant impact on existing schools in North-West Belconnen, particularly Charnwood PS.
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Attachment

Enrolments and school capacity in North-West Belconnen

	Enrolments		Change 2006-2012		Capacity 2012	Excess Places 2012	Capacity Utilisation 2012 %
	2006	2012	No.	%			
Primary Schools							
Charnwood-							
Dunlop	170	285	115	68	450	165	63
Evatt	240	294	54	23	450	156	65
Florey	377	359	-18	-5	500	141	72
Flynn	179	0	-179		0		
Fraser	331	353	22	7	350	-3	101
Higgins	191	0	-191		0		
Holt	184	0	-184		0		
Kingsford-Smith	0	582	582		600	18	97
Latham	206	253	47	23	325	72	78
Macgregor	317	358	41	13	588	230	61
Miles Franklin	380	384	4	1	384	0	100
Mt. Rogers	154	280	126	82	400	120	70
<i>Total</i>	<i>2729</i>	<i>3148</i>	<i>419</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>4047</i>	<i>899</i>	<i>78</i>
Secondary Schools							
Kingsford-Smith	0	376	376		500	124	75
Melba	582	480	-102	-18	779	299	62
Copland College	450	277	-173	-38	879	602	32
<i>Total</i>	<i>1032</i>	<i>1133</i>	<i>101</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>2158</i>	<i>1025</i>	<i>53</i>
All Schools	3761	4281	520	14	6205	1924	69

Sources:

Enrolments: ACT School Census, 2006 & 2012

School capacity: Towards 2020 – Renewing Our Schools

Notes:

1. The schools included as part of north-west Belconnen are those listed in Towards 2020. Since then Flynn, Higgins and Holt primary schools have closed, Kingsford-Smith School has opened and Melba HS and Copeland College have merged but remain on two sites.
2. Enrolment figures exclude pre-school enrolments because the latter are not included in the capacity figures except for Kingsford-Smith School.
3. Capacity figures are assumed to be the same as in 2006 for all schools except Kingsford-Smith School and Macgregor PS.
4. Kingsford-Smith School capacity is estimated at 1100 as stated on the school website. The primary and secondary capacities are estimates.
5. An increase in capacity at Macgregor PS is expected to be completed this year according to the ACT Government. See <http://www.hansard.act.gov.au/hansard/2011/week07/3122.htm>