

## **Save Our Schools**

# **Statement to the ACT Legislative Assembly's Education Committee Inquiry Into the Achievement Gap in ACT Schools**

### **The ACT has a high quality/low equity system**

- The ACT school system has very high quality outcomes by international and national standards evidenced in high average outcomes, high proportions of students achieving national and international benchmarks and high proportions of students achieving at the highest levels.
- There is also a large achievement gap in the average outcomes between students from high and low socio-economic status (SES) families.
  - The well known achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is an extreme version, which has specific features relating to Indigenous communities.
  - The achievement gap broadly refers to the influence of socio-economic background on education outcomes and which affects other ethnic groups as well.
- Reducing the achievement gap and improving equity means lifting the outcomes of all lower achieving students.

### **The achievement gap in ACT schools is large**

- The achievement gap in average results for high and low SES 15 year-old students in the ACT represents about 2½ years of schooling:
  - The gap in the ACT is the highest in Australia, apart from the Northern Territory;
  - There is no evidence that the gap has been reduced since 2000.
- Much higher proportions of low SES students achieve at the lowest proficiency levels and much lower proportions achieve at the highest proficiency levels than do high SES students.
- Low SES students in the ACT are doing no better than low SES students across Australia.

### **The achievement gap is a major injustice and a major challenge facing the ACT**

- Differential access to education blights a democratic society. It means that some social groups are consistently discriminated against in providing opportunities for rewarding livelihoods and successful participation in adult society.
- Large disparities in school outcomes for students from different social backgrounds entrench inequality and discrimination in society. 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.
- 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. It requires a comprehensive strategy.

### **Remedial policies should recognise that significant causes of the continuing gap lie without schools**

- The socio-economic circumstances of families are a major influence on school outcomes.
- Reducing poverty and inequality in the community have much to contribute to reducing the achievement gap. Indeed, it will be much more difficult to reduce the achievement gap without a substantial reduction in inequality in society.
- Government economic and social policies should aim to:
  - Increase labour force participation and employment for families of young people at risk;
  - Support the general welfare, health, mental health, adequate housing, and nutrition of families and young people at risk;
  - Ensure access to appropriate community-based programs for young people at risk.
- Early childhood policies also have a critical role to play. They should ensure that early childhood programs, including health services, are adequate and accessible to families in disadvantaged circumstances.

### **A comprehensive action plan is needed for schools to reduce the achievement gap**

- The extensive research literature on reducing achievement gaps in schooling highlights the importance of:
  - Improving teaching and learning opportunities for students who have fallen behind;
  - Providing a range of student welfare, behavioural and learning support measures;
  - Developing home/school partnerships; and
  - Increased funding allocations to schools based on student learning needs.
- The plan should focus primarily on government schools. ABS Census data shows government schools have higher proportions of students from low SES families:
  - About 24% of government school enrolments are from low SES families compared to 13% of Catholic school enrolments and 10% of Independent school enrolments;
  - In contrast, 75% of Independent school enrolments and 65% of Catholic school enrolments are from high SES families, compared to 49% in government schools.

### **Closing the achievement gap will require a large funding effort**

- Research studies show that the funding required for low achieving disadvantaged students to achieve adequate levels of achievement is two to three times the cost of educating an average student.
- The National Partnership Agreement between the Federal, State and Territory Governments will inject \$3 billion into 1500 disadvantaged government and private schools over 7 years.
  - This looks impressive and it is. It amounts to about \$2 million per school over the 7 years, or nearly \$300 000 a year.
  - Spread over an average school size of, say, 300 students, it amounts to about an extra \$1000 per student. Put another way, it would allow the employment of about 3 extra teachers in each school.

- This additional funding, impressive though it is, amounts to about 8% of current per student funding levels, currently estimated at about \$12 000. By comparison, what is needed according to the research is at least 12 times this amount.
- This gives us a measure of the enormity of the task facing the ACT and Australia.

### **It is imperative that increased funding is well-targeted**

- Finland has about the same per capita expenditure per student as Australia, and so is lower than the ACT, but achieves higher average outcomes and greater equity in student outcomes. It uses its resources more effectively.
- Program funding in Australia and the ACT is often too indiscriminate. For example, many states, including the ACT, have embarked on extensive across-the-board class size reduction programs. These are popular with teachers and parents. They are very costly. However, they have not resulted in higher average outcomes or reductions in the achievement gap.
  - Class size reduction programs and other programs should be directed primarily to the areas of high need.
- The priority should be to direct increased funding at reducing the gap and revise school funding allocation to increase the 'needs' component.
  - The current funding framework is only marginally structured to address equity. It is largely based on equal funding per student with relatively minor adjustments for identified student need.
  - The total 'needs' component of ACT school funding is only about 10% or less of total recurrent funding.
  - 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.
- A new system of funding schools should be developed to better allocate resources to reducing the achievement gap. An independent public inquiry should be established to devise a system of funding schools that gives greater emphasis to differences in student learning need between schools.

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