



AEU – ACT BRANCH SUBMISSION ON APPLICATIONS FOR NEW PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN THE ACT

The Australian Education Union – ACT Branch (AEU) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on applications for new private schools in the ACT.

The AEU is the peak professional and industrial organisation for over 3,300 principals, teachers and school support staff in ACT public schools and TAFE. This membership represents the vast majority of principals and teachers and an increasing membership base of Preschool assistants, Learning Support Assistants, Indigenous Education Workers/Officers, Youth Workers and other education workers who support students in public schools.

Requirements for in-principle approval

The AEU understands that matters relating to providing additional choice, diversity of schools, and the perceived need to serve particular religious beliefs are not to be taken into consideration by the Minister when assessing applications for new private schools.

Under the ACT Education Act, the Minister must consider only:

1. Whether a proposed new school would undermine the viability of existing schools; and
2. The demand for the school/campus including the level of registration of interest shown by the community.

Evidence of community demand

Canberra Christian School

The application includes little evidence of community demand for a new Molonglo campus. **No expressions of interest from prospective students/families are provided.** The only evidence provided is in the form of supportive letters from Christian Schools Australia, Adventist Schools Australia, Adventist Schools Greater Sydney, three parents of students enrolled at the existing campus and a former student. No evidence is provided regarding community consultation and there is no mention of what existing schools prospective students may come from.

Brindabella Christian College

The application includes little evidence of community demand for a new Belconnen campus. **Only two expressions of interest from prospective students/families are provided.** The only other evidence provided is in the form of supportive letters from Vicki Dunne MLA, Christian Schools Australia, Canberra Christian Life Centre, Northpointe Baptist Church and Brindabella Christian College Parents and Friends Association. No evidence is provided regarding community consultation and there is no mention of what existing schools prospective students may come from.

The application refers to a “groundswell of support”, yet no detail is provided as to the number of meetings held or indeed attendance figures from these meetings. Evidence of community demand is tenuous at best.

At Taqwa Islamic School

Names and addresses are listed for 168 students whose parents have expressed an interest in the proposed school. No letters of support are provided from the religious organisations or community groups who are said to support the application.

Impact on existing schools

Canberra Christian School

There are no existing schools in the new region of Molonglo, so it is impossible to assess the likely impact of approving the additional Canberra Christian School campus. Planning for Molonglo is still being conducted 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 and plans for future schools do not appear to be available as yet. There are too many unknowns regarding potential school provision in this new area of Canberra.

The AEU contends that 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 Primary School. Two other public schools (Rivett PS and Weston PS) were closed in the area as part of the *Towards 2020* plan. There are more private schools than public schools in Weston Creek and this is a situation that is unique in Australia and a highly questionable one.

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.

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 Christian 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 Primary School (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.

According to Brindabella Christian College's application, students are likely to come from suburbs in the North-West Belconnen region, and so draw enrolments from existing schools.

Save Our Schools has pointed out that projected population growth in Belconnen is insufficient 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>).

The group also points out 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 Primary School) by a private school.

At Taqwa Islamic School

There is little difference between the potential impact on school enrolments in Belconnen of the At Taqwa School and that of the Brindabella Christian College, as outlined above. In fact, the application makes plain that 116 students would leave surrounding public schools in the region to attend the proposed school. There is significant excess capacity in the region which could cater for the projected enrolments of the proposed primary school. A new school is clearly not needed.

If the At Taqwa School is to be 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. This is a very different situation to Belconnen.

Further comments

The 2012 ACT school census uncovered the fact that ACT government school enrolments were increasing and, for the first time, drawing students away from private schools. Minister for Education Chris Bourke rightly identified that “the results were a win for government schools” (*Canberra Times*, 16 April, p.2). Surely the opening of a private school, Brindabella Christian College, within a few hundred metres of an existing government school and within kilometres of a government school closed only a few years earlier, would represent a serious loss for government schools.

A similar impact on existing schools could be expected if the proposed Islamic School was opened in the Belconnen region. A Gungahlin opening is less contentious, in the view of the AEU.

Planning for school infrastructure in Molonglo is in its infancy and in-principle approval for a large Christian school in the region would be premature.

Recommendations

That in-principle approval not be given for:

1. 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.
2. The proposed new campus of Brindabella Christian College in Charnwood because it did not provide adequate or convincing evidence of potential enrolments and because it would have a significant impact on existing schools in North-West Belconnen, particularly Charnwood Primary School.
3. The proposed new At Taqwa School if it is to be located in Belconnen because it would have a significant impact on existing schools in North-West Belconnen.