

Report

on

Ginninderra District High School

and

The Revitalisation of Small Schools in  
Belconnen and the ACT

For

The Executive of the  
ACT Branch of the Australian Education Union

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# 1 Executive Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

Ginninderra District High School (GDHS) was formed in 1996 after Ginninderra High School and Charnwood High School were amalgamated. On Census Day 2005 (17<sup>th</sup> February) Ginninderra District High School reported a new enrolment of 37 students into Year 7 out of a total enrolment of 184. This represents a decline in enrolments of 57% since 2000. A further decline in enrolments is projected for 2006. In spite of GDHS's large priority enrolment area, only 20% of the in-area parents choose to send their children to the school. **Ginninderra District High School is a school that has been largely abandoned by its community.**

The issues highlighted at Ginninderra District High are part of much wider problems which are impacting on the quality of education for children in a significant number of ACT schools with declining enrolments.

Since the community backlash from the round of school closures brought about by the Schools' Reshaping Program in 1990, successive ACT Governments have been reluctant to explore alternative school structures for areas of Canberra where small schools have resulted from demographic changes or other factors. Failure to attack the problems experienced by small schools as they arise has only made the situation worse. The longer it takes to tackle the problems, the bigger they become and the more expensive the solutions are likely to be.

## 1.2 The Project

This report was commissioned by the ACT Branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) and began as an examination of the current situation at Ginninderra District High School. While the problems at that school are significant and need to be addressed promptly, there is evidence that these problems relate to issues that are more widespread. It is also apparent that solutions to the problems require greater examination and understanding of a range of educational, organisational, and community issues. These are detailed in the report.

The report is divided into two main parts.

- **Part A** identifies the problems associated with the low enrolment levels at Ginninderra District High School.
- **Part B** highlights items that may assist in providing solutions to the problems identified in Part A.

There are also range of items contained in the appendices, including:

- spreadsheets which provide current and future enrolment data on Belconnen schools.
- issues that relate to school size.
- issues faced by schools with declining enrolments.

The content of the report comes from a variety of sources including recent research, statistics provided on the ACT Department of Education and Training website and interviews with a number of principals. Additional information that would have given a

more detailed picture of the demographic movements of students in Belconnen was requested from the Department. Unfortunately, none of the requested material was received before the writing of the report.

### 1.3 Key Findings

This report:

- Shows that there is an immediate **need to reorganise and revitalise education services at Ginninderra District High School** and across the West Belconnen area.
- Demonstrates that the issues affecting West Belconnen are indicative of a **wider problem across the whole of the Belconnen area**. Any redevelopment of educational services should be a part of an ongoing revitalisation plan for the whole Belconnen region.
- Shows that **an increasing number of schools in the ACT are becoming small schools** and some of these are likely to become “residual” schools that contain abnormally high pockets of disadvantage.
- States the view that any **revitalisation of educational services** in the Belconnen area should be **firmly based on educational grounds**, as the educational and social development of young people should always be given the highest priority.
- Outlines the need for a **new community consultative model** to be developed for the revitalisation of ACT schools. Processes previously used (eg. School Closure, school amalgamations) appear to have met with little success and poor community support.
- Illustrates that a new ACT model for school reorganisation is essential as the issues confronting some of the schools in West Belconnen are also affecting other Canberra schools.

**In simple terms, there are three overriding issues for any community faced with changes to the structure of schools.**

- **What they finish with must be much better than what they have now.**
- **The process involved in moving from the current situation to a future model must be a positive community experience.**
- **The discussions and the final outcomes must focus on what is best for children.**

### 1.4 Recommendations

#### 2.10.1 Closure of GDHS

Ginninderra District High School should close and replaced by a new and better facility. Such a facility should be a part of an holistic plan for restructuring education in the West Belconnen area.

#### 2.10.2 Wider Plan

The plan for the West Belconnen area should form part of an overall plan for restructuring education across the whole of Belconnen and must focus on improving learning opportunities for young people and at the same time address emerging issues associated with some small local schools.

#### 2.10.3 Residual Schools

The emergence of “residual” high schools and primary schools amongst the increasing number of small schools in Belconnen (and across the ACT) is of particular concern. The Department of Education and Training needs to utilise a combination of the existing school performance, student performance and enrolment data in order to identify these schools and take the steps necessary to address the issues as a matter of urgency.

#### **2.10.4 Identification of Schools with Abnormally High rates of Enrolment Decline.**

The ACT Department of Education needs to develop a process for identifying those schools in which enrolments are declining at an abnormally high rate with a view to quickly addressing problems that are not related to normal demographic trends.

#### **2.10.5 Poor leadership**

If the Department deems that poor leadership is the main reason for the decline in a particular school’s enrolment, changes need to be identified and implemented as a matter of urgency. If changes are not successful, more drastic steps need to be taken.

#### **3.3.1 Community Connectedness**

Any plans for the restructure or reorganisation of educational services in West Belconnen (and other areas of the ACT) must be strongly linked to the needs of the community. This means that the geographic location of any new facility is important, the involvement of the community in the planning and development stages is essential, and close links between student learning and the wider community must be an integral part of the curriculum.

#### **3.6.1 Creating Full Service Schools in the ACT**

The concept of establishing new Full Service Schools, provides a creative, exciting and less confrontational method of replacing an increasing number of small schools in the ACT. The suitability of such a concept for West Belconnen and for other appropriate locations in the ACT, needs to be thoroughly investigated.

#### **3.6.2 Consultation With Community and other Stakeholders**

If new Full Service Schools were to be established in the ACT, the strategy for their implementation must include appropriate community consultation to ensure that local stakeholders have significant involvement in and “ownership” of the planning and decision making for each school.

## 2 Part A Ginninderra District High School

### 2.1 Background

Ginninderra District High School is situated in the suburb of Holt in the West Belconnen area of the ACT. It was originally called Ginninderra High School; was the first high school built under the ACT Schools' Authority, and accepted its first intake into Years 7 to 11 in 1974.

The school reached a peak enrolment of 1035 in 1986. The diversity within the community during this time was reflected in the cross section of students who attended the school. The academic success of the school was reflected in the subsequent success of the students who attended the school.

Ginninderra District High School was formed in 1996 after Ginninderra High School and Charnwood High School were amalgamated and the Charnwood closed down. This resulted in GDHS gaining a large priority enrolment area which now includes the feeder suburbs of Higgins, Holt, Latham, Macgregor, Charnwood, Fraser, Dunlop and Flynn (Flynn is shared with Melba High School, although GDHS only has 2 students from this suburb).

### 2.2 Current Situation

On Census Day 2005 (17<sup>th</sup> February) Ginninderra District High School reported a new enrolment of 37 students into Year 7 out of a total enrolment of 184 (Years 7-10). **This represents a decline in total enrolments at the school of 57% since 2000<sup>1</sup>** compared with an overall 4.7% decline in all other high school enrolments in the Belconnen area over the same period. Based on current figures, enrolments at GDHS are expected to decline by another 12% <sup>2</sup>at the beginning of 2006 to a figure of approximately 160 enrolments. The school will then be operating at 15% of its available capacity.

In spite of GDHS's large priority enrolment area **only 20% of the in-area parents choose to send their children to the school**. As students have left or bypassed their local high school, the enrolments at three other popular northside high schools (Belconnen, Canberra & Lyneham) have remained close to capacity levels. The general community perception is that GDHS should be avoided because its enrolment cohort has a high proportion of disruptive students. A parent commented that schools like GDHS provided a service to the community as "the disruptive students who go there are kept out of other schools."

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures place five out of the seven of GDHS's catchment area primary schools within the lowest 25% of socioeconomic disadvantage in the ACT. The ACT Department of Education provides additional Equity Funding to approximately twelve schools where populations are recognised as being the most socio-economically disadvantaged. GDHS and three of its feeder primary schools receive equity funding under this arrangement. GDHS is one of only two ACT high schools to be allocated equity funds.

**With such small enrolment numbers GDHS has become a financial liability for the ACT Education System.** In recent years considerable additional resources have been provided in order to maintain a reasonable educational program for the students. These have

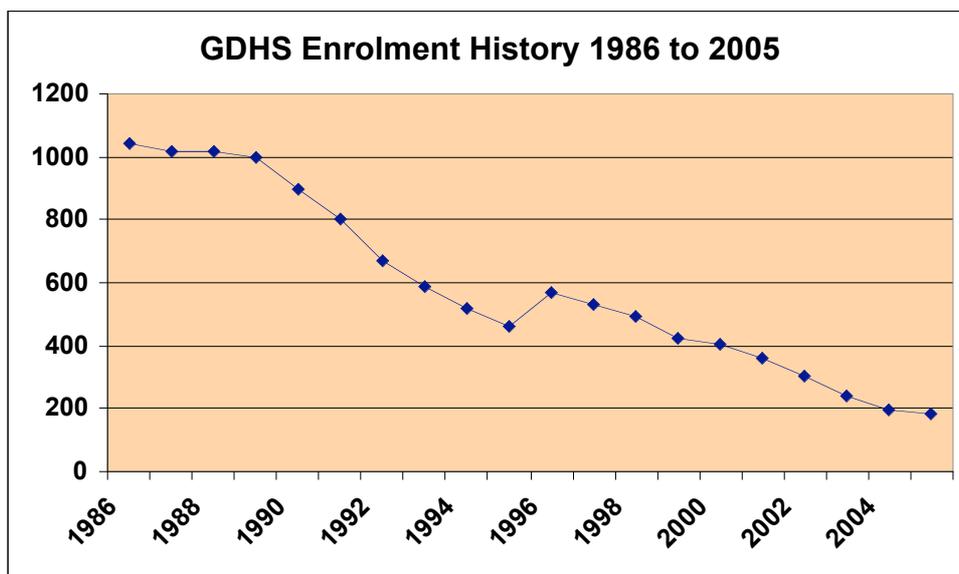
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<sup>1</sup> Statistics based on ACT Department of Education and Training February census figures for each year.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the likelihood that Year 10 leavers from 2005 will exceed 2006 Year 7 enrolments by a total of 23 students.

largely remained hidden within the ACT staffing budget, but it is estimated that additional teaching resources of \$200,000 have been provided to the school on an annual basis.

**It needs to be made very clear that the situation at GDHS is in no way a reflection of the current administrators and teachers at the school. Visitors to the school cannot be anything but impressed by the commitment of staff and their professionalism in difficult circumstances. The difficulty of their task, is however, reflected in the high level of staff turn-over compared with other high schools in the ACT.**



## 2.3 Statistics on GDHS

### 2.3.1 Enrolments:

- Total enrolment, 183 students at Census day in February 2005.
- Approximately 86% of these enrolments came from suburbs within the priority enrolment area, with the largest proportion coming from Holt (55 students or 30% of the total enrolment)
- Anticipated enrolments for 2006, 160 students - ie a further decline of 12%.
- Enrolments have declined 57% from 2000 to 2005 (ie from 427 to 183).
- In 2004, of the 980 students resident in the GDHS priority enrolment area who attend a government high school, only 160 or 16% were enrolled at GDHS. (The other 84% generally travelled to other northside government high schools)
- 44 students or 22% of the student population left GDHS before the end of the academic year in 2004. Approximately 50% of these re-enrolled at another ACT high school.

### 2.3.2 Students

- ACTAP results for Year 7 and Year 9 students at GDHS show that both groups have been consistently well below ACT averages in all strands tested.
- In recent years the primary school ACTAP results of the Year 7 intake has also been well below ACT averages.
- Student suspension rates at GDHS are approximately 106 for every 100 students compared with a rate of 25 per hundred across the high school sector in the ACT.

- Based on enrolment numbers, GDHS has an allocation of a school counsellor for a little over one day per week.

### **2.3.3 School Resourcing**

- At GDHS the average discretionary funds per student over the last few years has varied from around \$40 to \$80 per student. Over the same period the system sector average for all high schools is around \$200 per student.
- The ACT Schools' staffing formula does not generate sufficient staff to enable small high schools to run a comprehensive curriculum and the support programs required. In recent years GDHS has received supplementary staffing at an estimated equivalent of four extra teachers over a school year. Each additional teacher represents a cost to the Department of \$50,000 - \$60,000 plus on costs.
- GDHS is one of two high schools from a total of 12 schools in the ACT to receive additional funds based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics SEIFA Indices. The provision of an additional amount of approximately \$20,000 "Schools Equity Funds" to GDHS in recent years has assisted the school to provide some special programs and support for disadvantaged students.
- In addition to the equity funding, GDHS has also been successful in attracting a similar level of support from other external sources to assist with specific programs.

### **2.3.4 School Initiatives**

The dedication and commitment of the staff at GDHS is reflected in the variety of curriculum initiatives introduced to assist students. These include:

- a school focus on improving literacy and numeracy skills,
- access to a range of quality ICT equipment and programs,
- a pastoral care program aimed at supporting students to foster close relationships between the school, the students and their families.
- links with the community through the Christian Outreach breakfast program, the girls' self esteem program and the GRAPES program which delivers Certificate 1 VET qualifications to students in Building and Construction.
- the GAP program that provides disengaged youth a fresh opportunity to obtain a Year 10 Certificate.
- numerous extra curricula programs including a Year 7 camp, farming activities, art, woodworking club and outdoor adventure.

## **2.4 The GDHS Community**

The community profile of West Belconnen serviced by the Kippax Centre reflects a diversity of people including professionals, business people, tradespeople, retired citizens as well as a relatively high proportion of people who receive some form of government support. Many of the long term residents have lived in the area since it was developed in the 1970s. Recent real estate sales suggest that the relatively cheaper house prices and large blocks of land are attracting young families to the area as some older couples seek more compact accommodation elsewhere.

Information collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in the 2001 Census shows that many of the suburbs in the West Belconnen area contain a relatively high proportion of people who are regarded as socio-economically disadvantaged. Indicators such as unemployment, median weekly income, percentage of single parent families, percentage of adults with no post school qualifications, numbers of people accessing gambling counselling and credit/ debt services, all point to high levels of disadvantage within the

West Belconnen community. These high levels of disadvantage flow through to the local schools and are clearly evident in the student group at GDHS.

The West Belconnen Focus Group conducted a survey of people in the West Belconnen area in 2003. The survey was distributed through 24 local community organisations and 18 groups responded. Results of this survey showed that people were attracted to the area because of its bush setting, its rural aspect and pleasant environment. Many felt it was a good place for families with sporting clubs, churches, schools and community activities seen as major positive aspects of the area. Residents wanted to see an improvement in services (library, medical, buses, swimming pool), better security and higher levels of community policing, increased age care facilities, more facilities for young people (playgrounds, skateboard area, more cycle paths), improved night life (night clubs) and improved community ambience (coffee shops/ restaurants, upgraded & maintained suburban shopping centres).

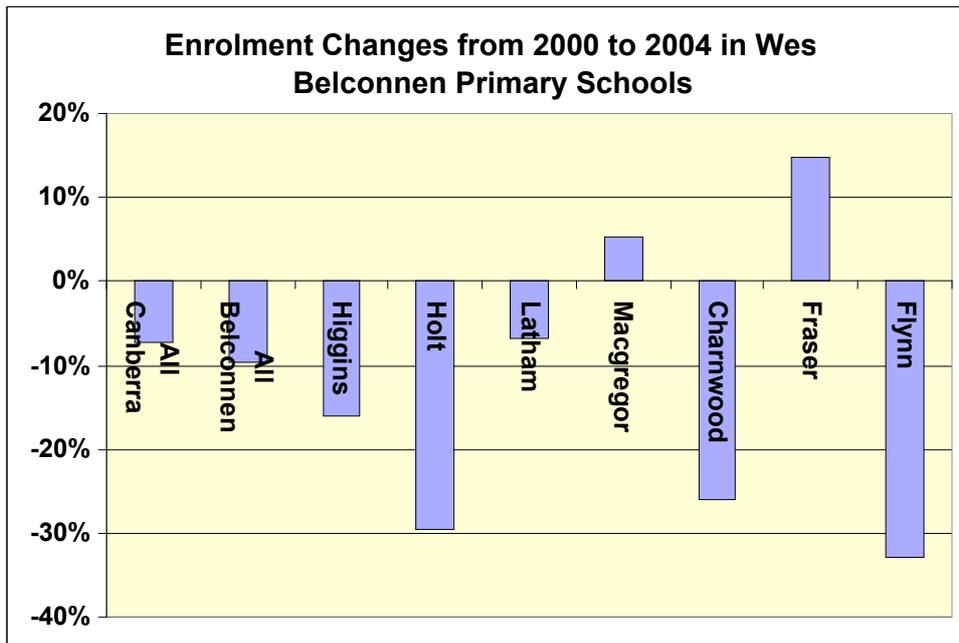
Recent government and business initiatives in the area seem to be in harmony with the community wishes. A new permanent library is currently under construction at Kippax, proposed bus lanes to the city will improve public transport access, and the construction of home units and a swimming pool complex aims to strengthen the Kippax area as a local centre for business and the community.

## **2.5 Community Choice of Schools in Belconnen**

The demographic, social and democratic issues associated with ACT parents choosing a school for their children is complex. There is a full range of parental attitudes, from affluent parents who fiercely believe in government schooling, to “battlers” who are prepared to suffer hardship to pay the fees at an “exclusive” independent school. Within the government school community there are those who strongly support their local school, while increasing numbers are prepared to travel, some a considerable distance, in an effort to select the “best” schools for their child(ren).

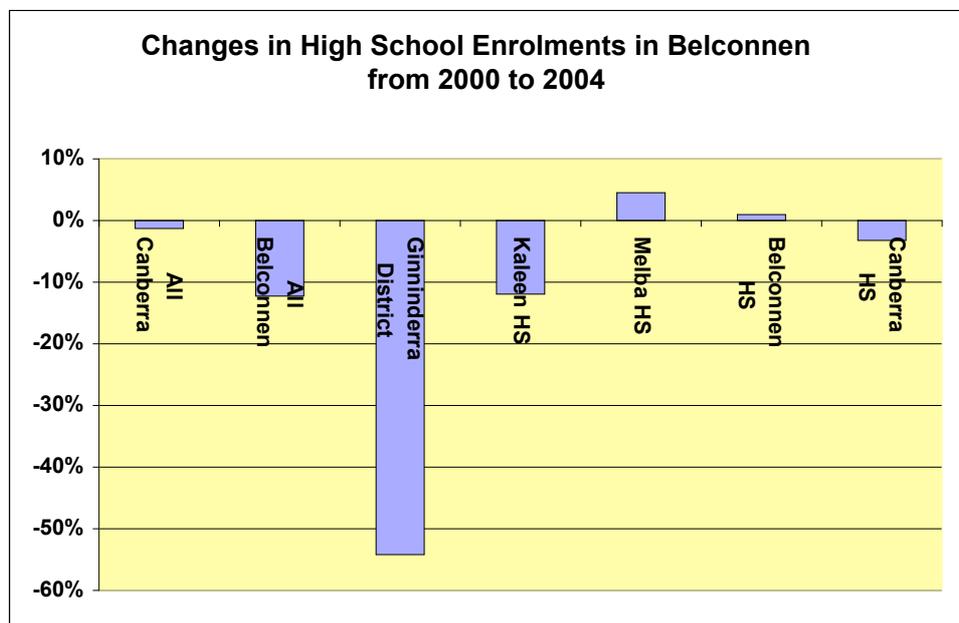
To gain a better understanding of the changing demographics and school enrolments in West Belconnen it is important to look at the whole Belconnen area. In North and South Belconnen, as a consequence of the decline in the school age population, available student spaces in schools increased. Then, competition and marketing activities between schools also increased when schools tried to maintain their enrolment levels. This in turn provided greater opportunities for parents to “shop around” for the school of their choice for their children. Added to this, community myths and perceptions emerged about the reputation and relative degrees of success of particular schools. The wider community’s view of particular schools, negative or positive, seem to be very difficult to change. Interestingly, some principals believe that currently parents are not just shopping for the “best” school for their children, but they are trying to choose a peer group for them as well.

In the Belconnen area, the combination of a dwindling school aged population and the increasing number of parents enrolling their children outside their local school has produced “winners” and “losers” as far as enrolment levels are concerned. Primary Schools such as Charnwood, Holt and Flynn have lost over 25% of their enrolments over the period 2000 to 2004. These are amongst eight Belconnen primary schools where the school population is now 200 or fewer. Only one of these schools has increased its enrolments since 2000 (Maribyrnong from 151 to 176). Based on ACT Department of Education projections, 12 of the 20 primary schools (60%) will have enrolments of 200 or fewer by the year 2009. School enrolments will then be approximately 56% of total school capacity compared with 62% in 2004.



Over the same period (2000-2004) a number of Belconnen primary schools have maintained relatively high enrolment levels of 280+. These include Florey, Aranda, Fraser, Macgregor, Miles Franklin and Kaleen. The last five of these have actually increased their enrolments over this period. The projected enrolments of these 7 schools for 2009 are all in excess of 300.

Of the five high schools in the Belconnen area, only two (Canberra and Belconnen) have enrolments above 450 students. These two schools over the last 5 years have had population levels which are consistently high and close to capacity (approximately 800). The other three high schools Ginninderra District, Kaleen and Melba have had enrolment declines of 54%, 31% and 16% respectively over the same period of time.



Projected enrolment figures based on current trends and population changes suggest that these schools will decline further by 2009 to 165, 270 and 360 respectively. It is worth noting that the enrolments at Lyneham High School (North Canberra Area – adjacent to Belconnen) have increased by 40% over the last 5 years to a level that is now in excess of 1000 students. This increase is not entirely due to student movements from the Belconnen area, although this group contributes a significant 277 of the enrolment figure.

## **2.6 Residual Effect**

The issues for GDHS are compounded even further by the “residual effect” caused by many of the more affluent parents sending their children to other government high schools outside the immediate area. This means that a community that is already recognised in ABS statistics as being “disadvantaged” is further penalised because the local high school becomes a concentrated pool of disadvantage within the Belconnen area. The history of poor ACTAP results of students who enrol at GDHS and the relatively poor ACTAP results of the students already at the school are indicators which illustrate this point.

Similarly, poor ACTAP results are common amongst the 32 students enrolled at GDHS who come from areas outside the priority enrolment area. Many of these students enrol at the school because they have had difficulty in settling into a previous high school environment. In reality, the majority of the out of area students are “unwanted” elsewhere as they often present as being “behavioural problems” with learning difficulties. The intake of this group further concentrates the disadvantaged profile of students at the school.

The evidence clearly demonstrates that GDHS has become a residual school. It is also likely that some small primary schools which feed students into GDHS, have become residualised as they too are suffering from high concentrations of disadvantaged within their school populations.

There is considerable research to demonstrate that students attending schools with a high proportion of disadvantage are more likely themselves to become part of a life cycle of disadvantage. The OECD reports that “students from a lower socio-economic background attending schools in which the average socio-economic background is high, tend to perform much better than when they are enrolled in a school with a below average socio-economic intake- and the reverse is true for more advantaged students in less advantaged schools.”<sup>3</sup>

There are strong indications that a significant number of small schools across the ACT have become residualised. Certainly there is considerable evidence, from ACTAP and other data to strongly suggest that this has happened in at least one or two other high schools. Similar evidence suggests that a number of primary schools both in the GDHS catchment area and across the ACT have suffered a similar fate.

Within the ACT Government Education System, twelve schools receive grants of between \$11,000 and \$30,000 each from the Schools Equity Fund each year. A total of \$270,000 is allocated to schools based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics SEIFA indices because they are deemed to have the highest levels of disadvantage in their population.

**It is interesting to note that in 2004, out of the 10 primary schools which received funds from this source, 6 had enrolments of below 180 students and only two had**

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<sup>3</sup> OECD, Education at a Glance, OECD Indicators 2002, 381 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris, Nov 2000.

**enrolments above 250. The two high schools which were allocated Equity funds both had enrolments below 340. No “large” school received Equity Funds in 2004. This of course does not mean that schools which receive equity funding are also small residual schools, but there is a strong possibility that some, if not many of them may be.**

## **2.7 Wider Implication**

While the first part of this report concentrated on the current situation at Ginninderra District High School, other high schools, colleges and neighbourhood primary schools where enrolments continue to decline face similar issues. It is important therefore to look more widely at the demographic patterns and issues associated with small schools.

In the Belconnen area for instance, population trends and projected enrolments are obvious. The statistics below show a continuing decline in enrolments of Belconnen primary schools and high schools. As a consequence there is an increase in the number of small schools across all education sectors. The demographic issues stretch across all education sectors. The impact on colleges is outlined in Appendix B.

## Belconnen Primary School Enrolments

	2004 Enrolments	2009 Projected Enrolment	School Capacity	2009 Proj En/ Capacity
<b>Primary Schools</b>				
Cook	122	110	150	73%
Charnwood	137	130	450	29%
Holt	171	120	450	27%
Mt Rogers	171	140	475	29%
Flynn	173	150	375	40%
Giralang	175	120	425	28%
Maribyrnong	176	185	550	34%
Latham	234	180	325	55%
Evatt	263	180	450	40%
Southern Cross	267	180	325	55%
Higgins	200	200	525	38%
Hawker	224	200	350	57%
Macquarie	230	225	375	60%
Weetangera	253	240	350	69%
Florey	396	300	500	60%
Fraser	281	345	300	115%
Miles Franklin	360	350	425	82%
Aranda	367	370	375	99%
Macgregor	362	380	450	84%
Kaleen	438	435	475	92%

## High Schools in Belconnen and North Canberra

	2004 Enrolments	2009 Projected Enrolment	School Capacity	2009 Proj En/ Capacity
Ginninderra District	195	164	950	17%
Kaleen HS	290	270	760	36%
Melba HS	428	359	779	46%
Belconnen HS	753	660	912	72%
Canberra HS	801	700	931	75%
Lyneham	952	924	969	95%
Campbell	590	604	836	72%
Total Northside HS	4009	3681	6137	60%

The issues as they relate to some primary and high schools in the Belconnen area reflect similar emerging problems elsewhere (eg. Kambah High School and the surrounding cluster of schools). There is an urgent need to address the current and emerging problems that relate to community demographics, small school enrolments and the educational equity issues associated with schools that have enrolments below their “critical mass”. The social, educational, economic and ultimately political costs of not doing so will become increasingly significant for governments and for the ACT community as a whole if these are not addressed soon.

## **2.8 Reasons for Enrolment Decline**

### **2.8.1 Demographics**

Changing demographics is the usual cause for the decline in enrolments in ACT schools. Typically, enrolments in suburban primary schools rise as the suburb is established, reach a peak after the suburb is developed and then decline steadily as the suburb matures. Older suburban primary schools are often left with enrolment levels of around 200 or less.

However, there are other factors that have influenced school populations in the ACT. While these are outlined in general terms below, it is likely that all of the factors have played some part the decline of enrolments at GDHS.

### **2.8.2 School Leadership**

The quality of leadership in a school can make a considerable difference. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence where the leadership provided by principals (and other senior staff) had a major impact on declining or ascending school enrolment levels. The direction of the school, the way the curriculum is organised, student achievement, communications with parents, school uniform and the quality of classroom teaching are all factors that the community associates squarely with the quality of the school leadership. There have been many cases in the past where the abnormal decline in enrolment levels of schools can't be explained through demographic trends. An important question for school communities is – “Is there a process for identifying and fixing leadership issues before the decline in school enrolments reaches a critical level?”

### **2.8.3 Choice of Schools**

All students living within a school's Priority Enrolment Area (PEA) have a guaranteed place at that school. Where student enrolment numbers are close to the number of places available, enrolment rules are strictly applied. As spaces become available, students from outside a school's PEA are able to enrol at the school. Schools with declining numbers in their PEA are usually keen to enrol “out of area students” as these students boost overall enrolment numbers and help maintain higher resourcing levels for the school.

As enrolments in most Belconnen schools have declined, the number of available spaces has increased, the marketing of schools has intensified and families are able to shop more widely to find “the best” school for their children. ACT parents see quality education for their children as a very high priority. Canberra is a small place and school “reputations” are hot topics of conversation amongst parents and are openly talked about in work places and social gatherings around the ACT. Community perceptions about which schools rate as “good schools” and which ones should be avoided have considerable impact on school enrolments.

Additional choice is provided from the private education sector for those families able to pay the fees required. On the northside of Canberra the increasing number of enrolments in private schools such as St Francis Xavier, Daramalan, Radford and Merici have further impacted on the declining enrolments in government schools. Currently, government schools provide schooling for approximately 60% of the overall school age population in the ACT but for high schools this is only 52%.

### **2.8.4 Parents Wanting “the best” for their Children.**

While there is no research to call upon, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that a significant number of parents who live in the “poorer” areas are sending their children to schools in more “prestigious” suburbs. This also ties in with a previous quote from a principal who mentioned that some parents were not just shopping around for a school but were choosing a “suitable” peer group for their children as well.

Interestingly, some ACT schools have successfully boosted enrolments by introducing “elitist styled” programs. Gifted and talented programs at Lyneham High School and Curtin Primary schools, the Unicorn program at Alfred Deakin High School and the introduction of the Baccalaureate at Narrabundah College have all had positive effects on local school enrolments.

### **2.8.5 Changing Work/Parenting Patterns**

Changing work and parenting patterns also influence the last two points. Many Canberra households have all parents working by the time the children attend full time school. They search for schools that are conveniently located either close to their homes or along their “home to work corridors”. In addition, they seek out schools that offer programs that provide them with the flexibility needed to accommodate their often conflicting parental and work related responsibilities. Consequently, schools close to areas of work, schools with after school programs and schools responsive to the needs of working parents become attractive options.

## **2.9 What Should Happen to Ginninderra District High School?**

### **Comment.**

**Realistically, the situation at Ginninderra District High School is beyond retrieval through direct intervention or additional resources. The poor community perception of GDHS makes it impossible for the school to ever regain its critical mass.**

GDHS is unable to operate effectively without continuous additional support. Renaming the school or undertaking major refurbishments on the building is money wasted because the 80% of the community who do not currently send their children to the school are unlikely to change their minds while the perceived “disruptive students” are still enrolled there. Ultimately, the school should close, but not before a better alternative is provided for the students and for the community.

Closing the school and moving the students elsewhere is an option. While there are sufficient spaces for the current students to be placed at other high schools within the Belconnen area, such a move would be highly disruptive for the GDHS students. Most importantly, this will not solve the problems associated with local small feeder primary schools. Moreover, it will deprive West Belconnen of a government high school facility.

**Clearly, replacing GDHS with a new high school in the area will not address the issues either as there are already too many high school spaces in Belconnen. A preferable solution would be to involve GDHS in a restructure that also includes the small primary schools in the area. Such an approach would address a number of issues simultaneously and would reorganise educational services throughout the whole Belconnen area at the same time.**

However, a new Full Service School could provide West Belconnen with an exciting new concept for revitalising education in the community and would give parents the incentive to consider the advantages of replacing a series of local small schools with a new and up-to-date educational facility. Such a model, if developed for the ACT, could provide:

- a new state of the art educational facility.
- quality education for children from Kindergarten to Year 10 on the same site
- an early childhood component.
- before school, after school and childcare facilities.
- close links with other community organisations

- close links with business, industry and other institutions
- specialist facilities for areas such as music, ICT, media and sport.

Plans to build a Full Service School in West Belconnen would need to be consistent with an holistic plan to rationalise education services across the whole Belconnen area. If one school was built in West Belconnen, another one or two may need to be built elsewhere within the Belconnen area to replace several small high schools and primary schools simultaneously. Different models could be tried (eg all primary, all secondary, early childhood to Year 3, K –10) depending on the individual needs of the community.

With appropriate community input and consultation, the establishment of Full Service Schools could become a new and successful approach for revitalising and reorganising educational services in areas of the ACT where clusters of small schools currently exist. These schools would need to be strategically placed so they did not cause problems for schools that currently have high enrolment levels. The current school structure would continue to operate as usual in areas where school enrolments remain viable.

## **2.10 Recommendations on Ginninderra District High School**

### **2.10.1 Closure of GDHS**

*Ginninderra District High School should close and replaced by a new and better facility. Such a facility should be a part of an holistic plan for restructuring education in the West Belconnen area.*

### **2.10.2 Wider Plan**

*The plan for the West Belconnen area should form part of an overall plan for restructuring education across the whole of Belconnen and must focus on improving learning opportunities for young people and at the same time address emerging issues associated with the increasing number of small schools.*

### **2.10.3 Residual Schools**

*The emergence of “residual” high schools and primary schools amongst the increasing number of small schools in Belconnen (and across the ACT) is of particular concern. The Department of Education and Training needs to utilise a combination of the existing school performance, student performance and enrolment data in order to identify these schools and take the steps necessary to address the issues as a matter of urgency.*

### **2.10.4 Identifying Schools with Abnormally High rates of Enrolment Decline.**

*The ACT Department of Education needs to develop a process for identifying those schools in which enrolments are declining at an abnormally high rate with a view to quickly addressing problems that are not related to normal demographic trends.*

### **2.10.5 Poor leadership**

*If the Department deems that poor leadership is the main reason for the decline in a particular school’s enrolment, changes need to be identified and implemented as a matter of urgency. If changes are not successful, more drastic steps need to be taken.*

### **3 Part B Searching For a Solution**

The following four components of this section may appear not to be connected. However, an understanding of each of these components may assist in determining a workable solution to the issues facing GDHS and some other small schools in the ACT.

The four components of this section of the report are:

- The Asset Model” versus “Deficit Model” of support for Disadvantaged Students
- Summary of the History and Issues Relating to School Closure in the ACT
- Connecting Schools with their Communities
- New School Structures in Queensland and Western Australia.

#### **3.1 “Asset Model” v “Deficit Model”-support for Disadvantaged Students**

The deficit model traditionally used in education is often regarded as a service approach to fixing some form of learning deficit (problem/difficulty) in students. The deficit model has traditionally been used for students who can't cope with their studies for some reason. It tends to focus on student weaknesses and on people who are at risk of “failing” academically. “For each deficit, educators have designed and developed programs to compensate for basic skills. In the process, the “client”, or child, is often dissected into a smorgasbord of needs and deficiencies. At the same time, the positive personality and social traits that most students exhibit are overshadowed or discounted<sup>4</sup>”.

“The deficit model of overcoming social disadvantage of injustice is seen by many to be another form of oppression where the learner is treated as a victim thus inhibiting the learner’s full development potential.<sup>5</sup>”

Counter to the deficit approach is the “asset model”. It is argued that a successful learning culture needs to build positively on what people already know and should aim to support all students through their learning development. The emphasis is on a more enabling and inclusive culture of learning which recognises that all learners have strengths as well as areas they want to improve. It provides opportunities for all students to become contributors, problem solvers and partners in learning. In situations where the asset model is working well, learning for students becomes a cooperative and supportive experience in a “team” environment. These students interact successfully with their community and also learn from each other.

The success of this approach to learning depends on having suitable school organisational structures, a flexible curriculum and most importantly appropriate classroom organisation and teaching practice. It is easy to see why it is beneficial to have a wide mix of student interests, skills and abilities in such a classroom environment.

However, one of the frustrations of teaching in a residual school environment is the lack of positive student role models. Often more academically capable and better behaved students have chosen to move away from their local school to attend a school elsewhere. Not only is the local school disadvantaged through the loss of these students but learning for the

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<sup>4</sup> Sautter, R. C. (1994). Who are today's city kids? Beyond the "deficit model."

<sup>5</sup> David Zyngier, Social justice and Democracy through Community Connectedness- isn't it time that education came out from behind the classroom door. Page 12

remaining students is affected because of the lack of positive role models This just adds another component of disadvantage to the learning culture of these schools.

**The purpose of including an item on the Deficit Model in this report is to point out that, pouring increasing amounts of additional resources into small residential schools in order to support disadvantaged students, may not produce the benefits expected. New structures and better learning environments may in the longer term be more cost effective and educationally more beneficial for the students concerned.**

### **3.2 Summary of the History and Issues Relating to School Closure in the ACT**

As mentioned earlier the simple solution to the problems at Ginninderra District High School would be to close the school and send the students elsewhere. However, it is important to be mindful of the history of school closures in the ACT because much can be learnt from the success or failure of the past processes used to close schools.

ACT residents are aware of the reports released in July 1990, “Schools Reshaping Program”, which recommended a series of small school closures and the subsequent community upheaval and political backlash that such proposals and closures caused. Much of the argument for school closures was based on evidence which demonstrated that small schools were more expensive to operate on a cost per student basis. The logic of the argument was that if “unviable” schools were closed the money saved could be used to maintain quality education programs for all students in the ACT. On the other hand, if small schools were allowed to remain open the ACT education dollar would have to be spread more thinly across the Territory, leading to a reduction in the quality of service provision. The economic rationalist arguments for school closures in the ACT were met with a great deal of opposition from school communities and from parent organisations.

The difficulty in closing small primary schools in the ACT is linked closely with the original planning concept of the community primary school, located in the centre of the suburb, providing safe and convenient access for all students without them having to catch buses or cross major arterial roads. Communities feel attached to their local neighbourhood primary schools and many parents are heavily involved in raising money and contributing considerable time towards the schools’ development. For many their local school is like a community centre that enables them to connect and maintain contact with other residents in their suburb.

The economic rationalist view on school closure fails to recognise that there is more to a school than people, bricks and mortar. Schools develop as a result of considerable investments of time and other resources that are put into the school by parents, teachers, students and members of the community. In most cases the community has helped develop the school’s culture, raised considerable amounts of money over many years and has made significant contributions to the resources, activities and facilities in the school. The sudden announcement of school closure (or the possibility of closure) evokes a whole range of fight for survival reactions from schools and their communities as angry residents, teachers and students are incensed that their efforts in building their community school are obviously not appreciated or recognised by government.

Additional community issues impact when the closure of primary schools is likely to affect the viability of local suburban shopping centres and the provision of other community services located near schools.

The issues relating to school closure are different for parents of high school or college aged children. Most students have to travel to do their secondary schooling and many students and parents shop around for the school/college which they believe suits them best. The travel argument is not as strong for those who can afford to travel and the allegiance of families to their community high school or college is not as strong. For instance across the ACT only 60% of college students attend their designated local college.

Past experience has shown that school principals and staff are placed in a very difficult and stressful situation when their school has been designated for possible closure. Not only do they get caught up with the emotional community response to “save their school”, but they have to maintain a focus on providing a quality education program for the students and at the same time plan ahead to ensure that a smooth transition is organised for the students if the closure is to proceed satisfactorily.

Cooperation between neighbouring communities is very difficult in a situation when school closures in a particular region is being considered. An atmosphere of competition is created that produces “winners and losers” when a final decision is made. The losers become particularly angry when they believe that the closure of their school is not going to lead to any positive improvement in the learning outcomes for their children.

In more recent years various processes and incentives have been tried to encourage communities in neighbouring small schools to voluntarily amalgamate. Very few school communities have taken up this option.

The history of school closure in the ACT provides some really important lessons which need serious consideration for any reorganisation and revitalisation of education services in West Belconnen to be successful.

- **Wide community consultation** is vitally important so that all of those concerned fully understand the issues and all feel that they have had a genuine opportunity to influence the planning and final decision making.
- Any **motivation for change must focus on improving the educational experience and educational outcomes of young people in the area**. Change for change sake or for economic reasons won't gain much community support.
- Any alternative school structure proposed to the community must be perceived as being **significantly better than what they have now**. The “new” concept must generate a feeling that “this will be a great place for my child to go to school.”
- Issues such as transport and safety for primary school children need to be addressed.

These lessons have been incorporated into the recommendations of this report.

### 3.3 Connecting Schools with their Communities

In developing a new revitalised model of education in West Belconnen and the ACT it is important to be cognisant of:

- the latest developments in curriculum,
- new pedagogies,
- the need for quality leadership,
- the importance of school being actively connected with its community,
- the delivery of full service school philosophies by incorporating important community services into the school facility.

The ACT system is highly active in developing new curriculum initiatives and has embraced much of the latest ideas that have come out of the world class research on “productive pedagogies”. School leadership is a critical issue as the development and appointment of quality leaders is essential for new initiatives to be successful. School success is strongly connected to good leadership, good curriculum organisation and good pedagogy. These are important system issues that require ongoing development and monitoring, but they are not the main focus of this report.

Nevertheless, the way in which schools are connected with their community is of interest because this becomes an important issue with any restructure or revitalisation plan. Recent relevant research in this area emphasises the importance of schools being connected with their community so that school/community relationships become an integrated aspect of school operations and student learning.

#### 3.3.1 Recommendation on Community Connectedness

*Any plans for the restructure or reorganisation of educational services in West Belconnen (and other areas of the ACT) must be strongly linked to the needs of the community. This means that the geographic location of any new facility is important, the involvement of the community in the planning and development stages is essential, close links between student learning and the wider community must be an integral part of the curriculum and relevant community services must be integrated into the school facility.*

### 3.4 How Have other Education Systems Responded to Similar Issues?

As in the ACT, many education systems elsewhere have tried a heavy handed economic rationalist approach to school closures and amalgamations. The disruption to student learning and the community upheaval caused by such announcements has forced governments to explore other processes which are likely to achieve community support, cause less disruption and produce better outcomes for students.

**In simple terms, the overriding issue for any school community faced with changes to the schooling structure is what they end up with must be much better than what they have now.** Without a clear understanding that the government will deliver a much better facility and better educational experiences for their children, communities are not likely to be cooperative in any process or plans for change.

**Queensland** has used a variety of processes to deal with small residual schools. The most common and successful approach has been the replacement of two or more small schools with a new educational facility. In some cases an existing school facility has been redesigned and refurbished, while in other cases complete new facilities have been

established. Whether they involve new buildings, refurbished existing facilities or both, schools are innovative in design, provide the latest technology and are built to high environmental standards.

The Queensland government has been forthright in saying to some communities that a new facility **will** be built to replace existing schools but from that point onwards the community has had a large say in the planning and establishing the new school. Such schools are all-ability schools but they are able to introduce a specialisation such as dance, music, visual arts, ICT, modern foreign languages and various sports. Many have clustered local small primary and high schools into a primary to senior high school facility (K-12), incorporating a middle school structure for the junior high school years<sup>6</sup>. This has given such schools tremendous flexibility and continuity of learning.

Similar approaches have been successfully used in **Western Australia**, an example of which is Shelton College in Perth's western suburbs. The two previous government high schools in the area were suffering from declining enrolments and increased competition from a number of local private schools. In order to create a new school environment, the architects were not required to adhere to the standard design brief for schools but were able to develop their own brief through a series of consultative processes. They were encouraged to incorporate the latest technology and environmental standards. In order for the school to become connected with its community and to provide a more flexible learning model for senior students, it was required to operate for 12 hours each day, 52 weeks of the year. Sheldon College opened in 2001 with 200 more students than were enrolled in the previous two local high schools. It currently has a Middle School of 500 students and a Senior School of 700 students. While these two schools operate on different timetables, with mostly discrete staffs, they share a number of facilities including the library, sporting fields, gymnasium and cafeteria.

In a recent publication Professor Brian Caldwell, Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, suggests that Australian governments should examine the development of Academies in **Britain**. Academies were set up in deprived areas to replace one or more existing schools that were performing poorly. He also believes that it worth pursuing options which involve the private sector as sponsors in government schools.<sup>7</sup> While these ideas may not be applicable to the ACT, it is interesting to note that issues in the UK, which are similar to those in the ACT, are being met by the creative response of building new and better educational facilities. The Blair government believes the approach has been successful and it plans to build 60 Academies by the year 2010.

### **3.5 Providing New School Structures for the ACT**

Closing or amalgamating schools is seen to be a destructive process that often leads to community outrage and alienation. A local version of the Queensland and Western Australian model offers some real appeal and hope for reorganizing and revitalizing education services in the ACT. Providing a new, modern, state of the art facility may be far more appealing to communities with small schools particularly if these schools embraced the concept of full service schools and if transport and security concerns of parents can simultaneously be addressed.

One possible design model for the new Full Service Schools already exist in the ACT. The newly built Amaroo School in Gungahlin provides a facility for preschool, primary and

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<sup>6</sup> Queensland high schools, by Australian standards, are quite large eg. 1500- 2000 students

<sup>7</sup> Professor Brian Caldwell, A New Vision for Public Schools in Australia Part 2, Article in *Principal Matters*, May 2004

secondary students on the same site under the leadership of one principal. A number of new building, environmental and technological innovations have been incorporated into this design to ensure that the school is a modern, first class facility.

### **3.5.1 Full Service Schools- What are They?**

Full Service Schools bring together at a single location, professionals from a range of services for the provision of education, family support, health and other community services. They focus on all the needs of the students at the school, engage with families and include the wider local community.<sup>8</sup>

- They can make provision for childcare, pre-school services, after school care, study support schemes (out of school hours and during holidays), sports facilities, and lifelong learning.
- The full service school can become a focal point for local residents to participate in community life.
- It can be a base for community services such as libraries, leisure facilities, recreational courses and for external services such as health providers and commercial services.
- The multi-agency approach aims to assist and support families
- It aims to motivate individual learning and to develop the whole child.
- Full service schools tend to raise attendance and cut truancy and consequently improve outcomes for students.
- The school becomes the heart of the community.

### **3.5.2 Full Service Schools for the ACT –A Chance to Dream**

The full Service School concept for the ACT will not only provide the opportunity to cluster a number of small local schools in one facility at a central location, it will also create the exciting prospect of clustering a range of community activities and services at the same location.

Imagine from a parent prospective being able to access childcare, preschool, primary school, after school care, high school, health care, counselling services, dental care, leisure activities, parenting courses, recreational and business courses all at the same location. Such facilities would need to take into account the changing parental responsibilities around childcare and work, and would need to be open all year round. This type of school could:

- provide a new high tech facility to be shared with and supported by the community.
- develop meaningful partnerships with the science and IT communities as well as with business and community-based organisations.
- develop flexible approaches integrating vocational education into the curriculum.
- engage students in community service and service learning.
- focus on the continuity of both academic achievement and personal development of each student.
- utilise a range of volunteer assistance from the increasing number of retirees.
- provide specialist courses and facilities.
- develop special relationships with Canberra University as a school for research and teacher training.

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<sup>8</sup> Definition used by Newcastle Local Education Authority UK. Newcastle LEA is developing full service schools as part of the citywide regeneration strategy.

The prospect of developing new school structures would also give the ACT government and the ACT community a chance to develop a new school which recognises that the relationships between schools and parents, parenting and work, schools and the community have all changed dramatically over the last decade. Implementing creative ideas that meet the needs of students, parents and the community presents important and worthwhile challenges.

### **3.6 Recommendations on a New Structure**

#### **3.6.1 Full Service Schools in the ACT**

*The concept of establishing new Full Service Schools, provides a creative, exciting and less confrontational method of replacing an increasing number of small schools in the ACT. The suitability of such a concept for West Belconnen and for other appropriate locations in the ACT, requires thorough investigation.*

#### **3.6.2 Consultation With Community and other Stakeholders**

*If new Full Service Schools were to be established in the ACT, the strategy for their implementation must include appropriate community consultation to ensure that local stakeholders have significant involvement in and “ownership” of the planning and decision making for each school.*

## **4 Appendices**

### **4.1 Appendix A- Data Spreadsheets on School Enrolments**

## 4.2 Appendix B Understanding the Issues that relate to School Size

### Process Used for Distributing Resources to Schools

To assist with an understanding of some small school issues it is important to have a basic knowledge of how schools in the ACT are resourced.

ACT Government schools work within a system of education that has its own set of rules regulations, operating guidelines, programs, expectations and methods of measuring school, teacher and student performance. Specific formulae have been developed in an attempt to distribute available resources as equitably as possible. The most important and most expensive resource in schools is teaching staff. The formula used to determine the **staffing levels in schools is based mainly on student enrolment numbers. Large enrolments provide a large school staff while small schools have fewer staff.** The size of school staff has a direct effect on a whole range of school operational and educational issues. These are dealt with later in the report.

### Optimal School Size

Some recent research in the USA has looked at school size in relation to student learning. The report entitled “High School Size: Which Works Best, and for Whom?”<sup>9</sup> indicates that: “the ideal high school, in terms of effectiveness (learning), enrolls 600-900 students. Students learn less in smaller schools than this, but students in very large schools (over 2100 students) learn considerably less.”

While some may dismiss this research as not being applicable in the ACT, it is interesting to note that in the “Reshaping Schools Program” report, and the follow up report written by Hugh Hudson in 1990, similar sized schools were promoted as being the most efficient in terms of cost effectiveness. Hudson made a case for consolidation of high schools as their enrolments went below 500 students<sup>10</sup>.

Secondary Principals in the ACT who have experienced declining numbers from around 600 to 400 students in their schools say that they have had to make considerable staffing and curriculum changes at various steps along the way. With 500 students, these school principals felt that they still had some organisational flexibility but at 400 the majority found it “really tough” to organise a quality education program for all students and to meet the requirements of new programs as they were introduced. (eg. Vocational Education).

### School Enrolments and Critical Mass

As a working definition I have used a figure of 550 students as being point at which an ACT high school reaches its critical mass. This an arbitrary figure based on averaging out the figures provided from available research, past data and the common view of current ACT principals. The figure could easily have been 600 or 500. It doesn't mean that schools are unable to provide quality programs below this figure, but it does mean that the decline of student numbers below this point begins to impact significantly on school programs, staffing flexibility and discretionary school funds.

In the primary school context I have used similar data to arrive at a figure of 320 enrolments as the point at which a school reaches its critical mass. There is a case for 350 students as this will ensure the equivalent of 2 classes in each year group even though most schools use composite classes. A school of this size provides flexible staff learning teams within various

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<sup>9</sup> High School Size: Which Works Best and for Whom?, Lee & Smith, American Education research Association, 1996

<sup>10</sup> These days the issues are more complex and resourcing formulae take into account various socioeconomic and student disability factors.

areas of the school. At 270 enrolments a primary school loses its deputy principal and this has a significant impact on organisational structures. \*\*\* is the point at which small schools are recognised by the system as requiring additional resources.

Interestingly the Hudson report saw schools of 300 to 200 as candidates for consolidation. (The reader is reminded that this report is based largely on economic criteria.)

### **The Effects of School Enrolments Falling Below a Level of Critical Mass**

As school enrolments drop below their critical mass, organisational structures and teaching programs need to be changed as previous operational and curriculum structures no longer remain viable or sustainable. Different structures and arrangements are often introduced in an attempt to deliver the same programs in an alternative way. This process tends to occur in incremental stages as the enrolment levels continue to decline slowly. Parents may not even be aware that it is happening.

The exact point at which a school reaches its critical mass is not clear cut, because this figure depends upon a range of educational, financial and community related factors. Some changes to school organisation and curriculum structure may even delay the effects of declining enrolments for a little longer. The levels will also be different for the various educational sectors such as primary, high school and college and will also vary depending on the SES data for each school.

Some of the consequences for schools as they approach and fall below their level of critical mass include:

- Economies of scale are reduced in a whole number of areas, but in particular there is a loss of flexibility in the way in which staff can be utilised, as there are fewer staff to allocate to an assortment of teaching and extra curricular activities.
- fewer resources, reduced discretionary school funds, fewer teaching staff, less depth and variety in staff expertise all lead to a subsequent reduction in the breadth of curriculum offerings and a reduction in extra curricula activities available for students.
- Finances become much tighter as the ratio of discretionary funds available per student begins to decline significantly.
- The capacity of the school to raise additional funds is reduced because there are fewer parents/families and a reduced school community to draw from.
- More time is diverted into marketing activities as the school attempts to reverse the decline in enrolments.
- Small schools become more stressful places in which to teach because of the additional workload placed on staff. This can produce situations where there is:
  - high staff turnover
  - a reluctance of experienced teachers to apply for positions at the school
  - high absenteeism amongst staff
  - difficulty in attracting relief staff, as work is seen to be less stressful in other schools.
  - difficulty in obtaining release time for professional development activities
  - low levels of administrative assistance
  - low levels of STA support for students with disabilities
  - low levels of counselling services at the school, means that teachers are often left to deal with difficult problem students without expert support.
- the situation becomes even more desperate in small schools which have become concentrated pockets of disadvantage. (see section on Residual Schools).

- In the ACT it is vary rare for an experienced principal to apply for a position in a small school. Most new principals see small schools as a stepping stone to bigger and better things. Small schools often have a succession of new principals who are learning the complexities of the job. While they may bring enthusiasm and energy to the position they lack the experience and expertise that the school often requires.
- The enrolment history of schools in the ACT shows that it is very difficult for schools that fall significantly below a level of critical mass to claw their way back - partly because the resources required and the economies of scale needed are no longer available.
- student choice and flexible curriculum arrangements which have been the cornerstone of the success of ACT colleges are a product of “large” college enrolments

### **4.3 Appendix C Small Schools and Issues Relating to Educational Experiences for Students**

There are many claims and counter claims made about the relative educational merits of small schools versus larger schools. While it would be ridiculous to suggest that small schools can not be successful places in which to work and study, there is considerable evidence in the ACT to suggest that it is more difficult to provide the same level of educational experience for students in small schools than it is in larger ones. This is a critical core issue for small schools.

This part of the report highlights some of differences between small and lager schools in the areas of:

- Curriculum
- Staff workloads
- Support services for students

#### **Curriculum**

The combination of the staff in a large school is different from the mix in a small school. Larger schools have more classes operating so there is greater scope to run specialist classes (eg. music, languages, reading support, visual and performing arts, technology, vocational education, sporting and recreational activities), and because of this there is the opportunity to attract and employ quality specialist teachers. These teachers add quality, depth, diversity and excitement to a school’s curriculum. It is often through these programs that young people find their niche or the “hook” that makes school exciting and enjoyable for them.

Smalls schools have to employ staff who are more generalist in nature because these schools often do not have sufficient number of classes to fully utilise a range of specialist teachers. Specialist programs may still be run at the school but most staff are required to teach across a number of areas, some of which are likely to be outside their fields of expertise or interest. As staff change over from year to year the mix of expertise changes thus making it more difficult for small schools to sustain some programs. Small schools are forced to respond by changing structures so that core areas are maintained from year to year and other programs are more itinerant depending on the skills of the staff. In addition, Paid Tutor Programs widely used for music tuition, become less sustainable in small schools. While all of this is not impossible to manage, it certainly becomes much more difficult for principals in small schools.

#### **Staff Workload**

While staff members in all schools, small or large, are essentially required to perform the same number of hours of face to face teaching there are significant differences between large and small schools in the load of additional duties teachers are required to perform. For instance much of the administrative workload is the same for all schools, but small schools have fewer administrative staff and fewer people in promotion positions to carry the load. Teacher involvement in new and additional programs becomes a greater burden. So do routine activities such as playground duty, school band programs and school sport as there are fewer people to take on these roles.

Workload issues are a real concern in small schools as staff try to maintain the range of school programs, keep high standards of performance and strive to ensure that the enrolment numbers do not decline further. The staff turn-over in small schools is often greater than in larger schools. Few experienced classroom teachers apply for small schools so these schools are often staffed with a high proportion of beginning teachers. While youthful enthusiasm is welcome, the relative inexperience of staff places an additional training burden on these schools. In the ACT this is accentuated by the mobility rule which means that beginning teachers are transferred after their first 4 years of service.

Principals in small schools say that there is an even worse staffing issue. When they have a staff member who is less than competent, this person's negative influence on learning is felt by a high proportion of the school. For instance if a school has two specialist mathematics teachers and the performance of one of these is poor, half the student population is affected in some way. In addition, if the other mathematics teacher is relatively inexperienced, there is no one in the subject area within the school to professionally genuinely assist the person to improve teaching practice. The lack of a range of positive role models is an issue in small schools particularly for beginning teachers. Teachers need to be encouraged and supported by good role models during their introduction to the profession.

### **Support Services for Students**

Parents may not be aware that the number of support people and support services provided by schools depends on school enrolment levels. For instance, small schools such as GDHS are provided with a qualified school counsellor for approximately one day per week. Large high schools and colleges have a full time counsellor. While the service provision for large and small high schools is generally in proportion to enrolments, small schools have a counsellor for one or two days only per week. As a result they struggle to provide service continuity essential for many young people in need of specialist ongoing support in a situation where there is a higher level of demand relative to the number of students.

#### 4.4 Appendix D Residual Schools

Residual schools appear to occur in most urban environments where there is free market choice of schools. Real educational and social issues emerge, as some schools with declining enrolments become concentrated pockets of disadvantage. As these schools become smaller, parents who are aware of the reduced curriculum opportunities for their children take them elsewhere. A cycle develops as parents who can afford to transport their children to a “better” school do so in increasing numbers. Leaving this situation to normal market forces may be seen as a safe political response, but ultimately someone has to accept responsibility for improving the poor quality of educational experience being provided to the young people in these schools.

Research examining poor performing schools in New Zealand states, “The problems of schools serving concentrations of disadvantaged students will not be solved by school autonomy and parental choice. To the contrary, reforms of this type exacerbate the problems of such schools”<sup>11</sup>.

Most of the research relating to “residual” schools seems to have been carried out in the urban areas of large cities such as New York, Chicago and London. This research shows that as urban schools become smaller they tend to have higher levels of disadvantaged students.

Sally Tomlinson in an article entitled “Sociological Perspectives on Failing Schools”<sup>12</sup> quotes research carried out in Scotland:

“As research carried out a decade previously in Scotland demonstrated (Adler et al, 1989), schools not ‘chosen’ by more affluent or aspirant parents lost resources but often had to remain open while offering a less well-resourced education to the remaining students. Indeed, this Scottish research demonstrated that schools which lost pupils through parental choice were those in areas with a high incidence of social problems, and that the schools, which remained open to serve their remaining clientele, “had to pay a heavy price as they became even more stigmatised than previously”<sup>13</sup>

In the ACT there are strong indications that some schools have become “residual schools”. Certainly there is considerable evidence, from ACTAP and other data to strongly suggest that this has happened at GDHS and to at least one other ACT high school. Similar evidence suggests that a number of primary schools both in the GDHS catchment area and across the ACT have suffered a similar fate.

Within the ACT Government Education System, twelve schools receive grants of between \$11,000 and \$30,000 each from the Schools Equity Fund each year. A total of \$270,000 is allocated to schools based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics SEIFA indices because they are deemed to have the highest levels of disadvantage in their population.

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<sup>11</sup> When Schools Compete, A cautionary tale based on New Zealand's experience with decentralization, choice, and marketplace-based reforms. By Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd, 2000, Duke University's Sanford Institute of Public Policy

<sup>12</sup> Article found in International Studies in Sociology of Education, University of London, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1997

<sup>13</sup> Adler, M., Petch, A. & Tweedie, J. (1989) Parental Choice and Education Policy. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Page 215.

**It is interesting to note that in 2004, out of the 10 primary schools which received funds from this source, 6 had enrolments of below 180 students and only two had enrolments above 250. The two high schools which were allocated Equity funds both had enrolments below 340. No large school received Equity Funds in 2004. This of course does not mean that schools which receive equity funding are also residual schools, but there is a strong possibility that some, if not many of them may be.**

## 4.5 Appendix E A Professional Perspective

Principals' experience of some parents' perspectives and public commentary during school closure debates has often highlighted misunderstandings about small schools; eg

**“Unfortunately, some parents equate small schools with small class sizes and better pastoral care. This is a complete fallacy.** Children in larger primary school settings have a greater range of educational experiences and opportunities brought about by the flexibility larger schools have in the management of staff and the curriculum. A quality pastoral care system is one of the essential foundations of any school. Additionally, in a larger setting there are a greater range of backup support mechanisms and qualified personnel to assist young people who require special learning or behavioural support.”

This principal's comments reflect the strongly held private views of the primary principals interviewed for this report.

Many principals have a great deal of difficulty in talking publicly on the negative aspects associated with small schools. This is particularly so if they happen to be principals of small schools where their main priority is to work effectively with their staff and parents to provide the best possible education for the children in their care. This, they are committed to do, contributing the necessary time, effort and dedication to the tasks involved. In this environment, for principals to openly discuss the problems associated with small schools would be seen as undermining their school.

A number of principals in small schools were interviewed in their schools for this report and were prepared to speak frankly – in private. When asked if their small schools posed difficulties for them or their staff, invariably the responses were, “Let me close the door before I speak”. This would usually be followed by a comment like, “Don't get me wrong, this is a good little school and many students here do very well, but I honestly believe that the community doesn't know what they are missing out on - being in a small school.” They would go on to mention that teachers in their schools were “stretched” and overworked as they attempted to provide (with varying degrees of success) the same level of service students would receive in a larger school.

They were careful not to say that students in a small school environment were disadvantaged. They did express the view, that students in a larger school environment (not too large) were advantaged by what such a school could offer.

Principal professional associations over the last 10 years have consistently and formally requested action be taken to reduce the number of small schools in the ACT. While principals are aware of the political difficulties involved in closing schools they feel strongly that a successful method of reducing the number of small schools in the ACT must be found.

#### **4.6 Appendix F. Demographic Issues for ACT Colleges**

Changing demographics and varying student choice patterns are impacting on the enrolment levels at many colleges. Declining enrolments can have the effect of both reducing curriculum options and student support structures. This becomes particularly difficult at a time when there are demands for colleges to expand curriculum offerings and enhance support structures for underachieving and disengaged students.

The following demographic figures and trends (provided by DEYFYS) suggest that the current situation will deteriorate, resulting in the marginalisation of one or two colleges over the next few years.

- In all established ACT districts, excluding Tuggeranong and Gungahlin, the numbers of secondary college aged young people in the population is declining.
- The ACT population projections 2002-2032 predict that the ACT will grow from an estimated of 321,800 in 2002 to approximately 389,000 in 2032. However, over the same period the number of secondary school aged students is projected to decline from 32,500 in 2002, to around 30,800 in 2012 and 27,400 in 2032.
- In all sectors (primary, high school and college) the percentage of students attending non-government schools continues to increase steadily.
- From 2000 to 2004 the percentage of college-aged students attending non-government colleges has dramatically increased from 30 to 36%. A similar decline is reflected in the government college sector. (e.g. 3.6% decline from February 2003 to 2004).
- All of the 4 northside colleges Copland, Hawker, Lake Ginninderra and Dickson take students from a wide range of suburbs across northern Canberra and Gungahlin. Three of these colleges are situated in Belconnen. Only Hawker College (which incidentally has the smallest PEA of all ACT colleges) has enrolments close to capacity (approximately 880).
- In 2004 enrolments at Copland, Lake Ginninderra and Dickson were 355, 646 and 612 respectively. It is envisaged that these numbers will slightly increase over the next 5 years but even then Copland will be operating at 45% capacity, Dickson at 62% capacity and Lake Ginninderra at 78% capacity.
- These figures take into account the gradual increase in students travelling from Gungahlin (Currently 400+ increasing to 600+ by 2009) and the assumption that no college will be built in that area before 2010. Even so, it is clear that all of the current and future college enrolments on the northside of Canberra could be absorbed into three colleges up to and beyond 2009.
- For instance, if Copland College were closed the three remaining colleges would be operating at approximately 90% capacity. When the new college is built at Gungahlin three northside colleges would have even greater capacity.
- When the new college is finally built in Gungahlin (programmed for 2010+) it will cause a “double whammy” for the ACT government. The cost of building the college is likely to be between \$35 to \$45 million and the 600 plus students for the college will come from places already being accessed at other northside colleges. The fall of 600 enrolments will have a debilitating effect on all northside colleges unless one or maybe two colleges in the area are closed.

College enrolment trends and possible methods of reducing the impact of declining enrolments on student programs require further investigation

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