

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

Submission on the Proposed Re-location of the Islamic School

Summary

There are three significant issues at stake in the proposed re-location of the Islamic School to the CIT Weston site. One is the privatisation of a major government-owned education facility which otherwise could be used for public education and social purposes. The second is the additional assistance to be provided to a single private school that is not generally available to other private schools and the consequent precedent created for future government financial support to private schools in the ACT. The other issue is the impact of another school in Weston on existing government and private schools in the region.

Save Our Schools recommends that the site, as a publicly owned facility, should be retained for public education or other public uses and not handed over to the Islamic School.

In addition, the current consultation is unduly narrow. It is limited to consideration of one option only. This is not an adequate or proper consultation on the use of a major facility. It appears to be governed by very short-term horizons rather than how best this facility might be used for the broader community interest in the long term.

Save Our Schools recommends that a further consultation should be undertaken on the role this facility could serve in the broader context of the Molonglo Valley development and, in particular, to the future urban development of North Weston, Coombs and Wright.

Submission

Save Our Schools is opposed to the site being handed over to the Islamic School or any other private school for several reasons.

First, it is stated government policy not to hand over former school sites to be used by private schools. The Chronicle (18 August 2009) reported a spokesman for the Education Minister, Andrew Barr, as follows:

“The Government has also made it clear that it is not government policy to hand former school sites over to non-government operators.”

This policy was made clear also in the earlier discussion of the future use of the Higgins and Holt primary school sites.

It is difficult to understand the rationale for the distinction being made between not handing over former government school sites to private schools and handing over other government education facilities such as the CIT Weston site. If it is government policy not to hand over former school sites to private schools, why is this policy not equally applicable to other education facilities such as the CIT site? Save Our Schools believes that the same principle is

at stake and that government policy to not hand over former government school sites to private schools should apply equally to the CIT Weston site.

Second, the Islamic School appears to be gaining special consideration from the ACT Government not afforded other private schools regarding the use of government facilities.

It is established practice for the ACT Government to make direct land grants to new private schools, but it has not been a general practice to hand over existing government-owned buildings to private schools. Private schools are expected to make their own arrangements for school buildings and facilities, albeit with the aid of Federal government capital grants.

The *Canberra Times* [20 August 2009] reported the Chief Minister as indicating that some of the existing buildings could be retrofitted and save the school from having to construct a new school. Such an arrangement would constitute a major government subsidy to the school not available to other private schools. The CIT Weston site is a multi-million dollar facility.

Handing over such a major public facility to a private school would create a very significant precedent for future ACT Government policy towards the capital funding of private schools. It could mean that the government is committing to helping other new private schools, and those seeking expansion in the future, by providing access to existing publicly-owned facilities.

Even if these schools are charged rent, and this is by no means clear in the Chief Minister's proposal, it would constitute significant extra government assistance to the establishment and expansion of private schools because they would not have to incur the up-front capital costs of procuring their own buildings.

Third, the ACT Government closed two government primary schools in Weston Creek at the end of 2006 because, it said, of declining enrolments. Yet, it is now considering re-locating a private primary school to the area as well as extending it to incorporate a high school. It is envisaged the school will eventually have 900 enrolments.

This will put significant additional enrolment pressures on existing government and private schools in the area. It is a major inconsistency in policy to deprive people in Weston Creek of two small government schools (Rivett and Weston) and provide buildings to a private school that will draw at least some enrolments from existing schools in the region in the future. It does not make sense to re-locate a private school to a region with declining school enrolments.

The Government should explain why it is prepared to close government schools in a region it says is experiencing declining numbers of school-aged children while looking favourably at re-locating a private school to the region. It has all the makings of another failure in school planning by the ACT Government.

The impact of such a large school on future enrolments at existing schools should be fully assessed before proceeding with re-location of the school. The establishment of such a large school on the site could mean the closure of additional government (and private) schools in the region in the longer term.

Save Our Schools recommends that the CIT Weston site be considered for other public education or community uses.

The present consultation is not adequate for such a major facility. The consultation is restricted to consideration of one option only. It could be said to be a biased consultation process. A proper consultation would consider a wide range of options for the future use of the site.

Save Our Schools considers that the priority use of the site should be for public education enhancement. The Australian Education Union (AEU) proposed in the pre-Budget consultations for the 2008-09 ACT Budget that the site be used for an alternative vocational pathways school. This is a worthwhile proposal which should be fully explored and assessed.

The union has said that the site is ideally suited to establishing a vocational training facility for both students at risk of dropping out of school and those who have disengaged from schooling. It has the space for vocational training equipment that generally is not fully available in existing ACT colleges or, indeed, private schools.

It is paradoxical that the ACT Government has refused to support this proposal to enhance public education in the ACT, but it is prepared to consider the site for a private school. The AEU proposal for an alternative vocational pathways school for at risk students surely fits that purpose better than any private school, regardless of its religious basis.

The site should also be considered in the context of the Molonglo Valley and North Weston urban developments. As a major existing facility close to this region, it could make a valuable contribution as a public education and/or community facility for this region, especially for the new suburbs of North Weston, Coombs and Wright. It seems very short-sighted for the ACT Government to only consider the future use of the site in terms of its use by a small private school when it could play a major role serving these new urban areas.

Save Our Schools recommends that a broader consultation be conducted on how the site could be best used to serve the general ACT community and the new urban developments in the Molonglo Valley.