

The State of ACT Education

Trevor Cobbold

Speech to Community Alliance Party Forum

Havelock House, Canberra

2 July 2011

The ACT school system is under-performing. It has very high quality outcomes, but results have declined over the period of the Labor Government and there is extensive social inequity with a large achievement gap between students from low and high income families. Social segregation is also increasing.

High quality school system

A snapshot of student outcomes in the ACT shows that they are very high by national and international standards.

The ACT has high average outcomes in the international Programme for International Assessment (PISA) results for 15 year-olds conducted by the OECD. It has the highest average point scores in reading and science in Australia and the second highest in mathematics, just one point behind Western Australia. When statistical uncertainty is taken into account, the ACT is achieving at a higher level than four states and similar to three states in reading, mathematics and science.

High proportions of ACT 15 year-old students are performing at the most advanced levels. In 2009, 18% were at the most advanced reading levels, 22% in mathematics and 20% in science. These proportions are higher than in any other state apart from Western Australia in mathematics which has a similar proportion.

They are amongst the highest proportions in the OECD. The reading proportion is the higher than any OECD country, the maths proportion is the same as Finland and below only Korea and Switzerland and the science proportion is higher than in any OECD country.

The average results in the national literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) tests are the highest or equal highest in Australia. In 2010, Year 5 reading results were the highest in Australia, writing and numeracy results are similar to NSW and Victoria and higher than all others. Year 9 reading results were the highest in Australia, writing is similar to the Australian average and four other states, numeracy is similar to NSW and Victoria and higher than in other states.

Retention rates from Years 7/8 to 12 and completion rates for Year 12 are also the highest in Australia. Data for 2009 show that 87% of ACT students who start Year 7 remain until Year 12 compared with an average of 76% in Australia and 77% of Year 12 students gained a Year 12 certificate compared with 64% across Australia.

The ACT school system is underperforming

However, despite the ACT having much higher average income levels, its school outcomes are not much different from those of Sydney & Melbourne. ACT Year 5 literacy and

numeracy results are similar to or below those of Sydney and Melbourne. Year 9 NAPLAN results are also broadly similar to Sydney and Melbourne, although the ACT does much better in reading.

School outcomes in the ACT have declined under the Labor Government. Average reading and mathematics results for 15 year-olds have fallen by about 20 points on the international PISA scale since 2000, which represents about six months of learning. Science results have also declined.

The proportion of students not achieving the reading proficiency benchmark increased from 8% to 13% between 2000 and 2009 and the proportion not achieving the mathematics benchmark increased from 11% to 14% between 2003 and 2009. The proportion of students achieving at the most advanced level in reading fell from 25% to 18% between 2000 and 2009 while the proportion achieving at the most advanced level in mathematics fell from 27% to 21% between 2003 and 2009.

School retention rates from Years 7 to 12 in the ACT have also declined. The average retention rate for all ACT schools fell from 89% in 2001 to 87% in 2009 while national retention rates increased from 73% to 76%. The rate for government schools fell from 108% to 100%, although part of this fall is due to an increase in Year 11 and 12 capacity in private schools. The proportion of students completing Year 12 has not increased since 2001.

Low equity school system

The ACT school system is also under-performing on equity. There is a massive difference between the results of the highest and lowest achieving students. The ACT has the largest spread of test scores for reading, mathematics and science in Australia, except for the NT;

There is a large achievement gap, some would say a chasm, between rich and poor in ACT schools. The latest PISA results show that the ACT has the largest achievement gap between high and low socio-economic status (SES) students in Australia. On average, low SES students are about three to four years in learning behind high SES students.

Low SES students are doing worse than those in most other states. Their average results are about six months or more of schooling behind low SES students in all other states except Tasmania and the Northern Territory. The latest PISA report effectively condemns the ACT Government's record in meeting the needs of low SES students. It says:

....low socioeconomic students in the Australian Capital Territory are not particularly well served by their education system, with average scores for these students only just above those for Tasmania and the Northern Territory, and between 19 and 24 score points lower than students of the same socioeconomic level in the other five states. [p. 281]

The latest NAPLAN results also show large achievement gaps between children of highly educated and highly skilled parents and those from lowly educated and low-skilled families. For example, Year 5 and Year 9 students of low educated and low-skilled parents are about three to four years behind students of high educated and highly skilled parents in literacy and numeracy.

The achievement gaps between low and high SES students in the ACT do not appear to be declining, but it is very hard to make definite judgements on the available data.

Extensive social segregation in ACT schools

Another feature of the ACT school system is the high level of social segregation between schools.

ABS Census data shows government schools have higher proportions of students from low income families while Catholic and Independent schools have higher proportions of students from high income families. Some 74% of Independent school enrolments and 64% of Catholic school enrolments are from high income families, compared to 49% in government schools. In contrast, 24% of government school enrolments are from low income families compared to 13% of Catholic school enrolments and 10% of Independent school enrolments.

Social segregation in the ACT school system has increased over the past 20 years. Since 1991, the proportion of students from low income families has increased in ACT government primary and secondary schools while the proportion in private schools declined.

The increasing social segregation in schools reflects the drift of enrolments to private schools. It is higher income families who are choosing private schools.

This trend of increasing social segregation is a major concern because it tends to exacerbate inequity in education and undermines social tolerance and cohesion.

The major sources of achievement gaps are outside schools

Reducing the large achievement gaps is the most important challenge facing the ACT school system. To do this we need to start with the sources of inequity.

The main factor behind these achievement gaps is the differing socio-economic circumstances of families. The My School website shows that high SES government schools do just as well as high SES private schools in Canberra.

Reducing poverty and inequality in the community have much to contribute to reducing the achievement gaps. Indeed, it will be very difficult to reduce the gaps without a substantial reduction in inequality in our community.

Government economic and social policies should aim to do several things to reduce social inequality and poverty. First, they should increase labour force participation and employment for families of young people at risk. Second, they should support the general welfare, health, mental health, adequate housing, and nutrition of low income families and their children. Third, they should ensure access to appropriate community-based programs for young people at risk.

Early childhood policies also have a critical role to play. Governments should ensure that early childhood programs, including health services, are adequate and accessible to families in disadvantaged circumstances. This has been one area of progress under Labor.

A comprehensive plan for equity in education is needed

We also need a comprehensive education strategy directed at reducing education inequity. It should focus primarily on government schools, because the large majority of low SES students – about 75% of them - attend government schools.

The extensive research literature on reducing achievement gaps in schooling highlights the importance of three key approaches.

The first is improving teaching and learning opportunities for students in low SES schools. Policies here should include very low class sizes, high quality teachers and support staff, intensive individual and small group work with those who fall behind. Low SES schools should have more adults to support students at risk.

The second key approach is the provision of a range of student welfare, behavioural and learning support measures. These should involve multi-disciplinary teams of teachers, counsellors, social workers, health professionals and other social welfare professionals to implement early intervention programs. Low SES schools should be full service schools.

Third, developing home/school partnerships is critical. Parent participation is fundamental to improving attendance at schools and outcomes and systematic support should be given to such programs. Despite the rhetoric about the importance of parent participation in ACT government schools there are no funded programs. Home/school liaison officers are a practical way of increasing parent participation in children's learning.

The key to all these approaches is a new funding system that provides more resources to students in need. There should be a much greater "needs" component in school funding. The current funding framework is only marginally structured to address equity. It is largely based on equal funding per student with relatively minor adjustments for identified student need; The total 'needs' component of ACT school funding is only about 10% or less of total recurrent funding.

In summary, the ACT has a shameful record on equity in education. It is shameful for such a well-off community. It is an indictment of 10 years in government by Labor. All we have had is rhetoric about social justice without substantive action. We need a fundamental change of approach with genuine policies supported by real funding to reduce inequity in our community.