



Issues Paper: Educational Inequity in the ACT

July 2015

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The Youth Coalition of the ACT and ACTCOSS acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

We acknowledge that the Indigenous people hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land. The Youth Coalition of the ACT and ACTCOSS celebrates Ngunnawal culture and the invaluable contribution it makes to our community.

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Foreword

This paper highlights the importance of education and the issues and challenges of educational inequity in the ACT. Most young Canberrans will have a positive experience at school, but our high average attainment works to hide the fact that there are students falling behind, not achieving and disengaging from school in the ACT.

The ACT public education system is currently moving towards greater school autonomy, in which ACT public schools will exercise greater control of how money is invested in their school. We believe this provides an opportunity for the community sector to work with schools in new ways. In this changing landscape, it is necessary that community sector organisations have strong collaborative relationships with the schools in their area and that the community sector is working together with schools.

Over the next year, the Youth Coalition, in partnership with ACTCOSS, will be working with ACT community sector organisations to develop a common understanding of what is needed to address educational inequity and support the students that are not succeeding in our school system. This paper is designed to stimulate discussion and provide background for an initial conversation about what is working well in our education system, where improvements can be made and the role of the community sector in supporting and working with young people, their families, and schools, to ensure that all young people can succeed in education.

The importance of education

The important role education plays in a young person's life is well documented, and its impact on future life chances is clear. For young Australians, whether they engage with education and have positive experiences at school is one of the most significant determinants of their longer term capacity to fully participate, economically and socially, in our community.

Employment

Education is key to supporting young people's employment pathways. Education, particularly higher education, is directly linked with employment and income. In their report, *Australia's Welfare 2013*, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare find that people with a non-school qualification, be it a certificate, diploma or advanced diploma, bachelor degree or graduate qualification, 'have higher rates of participation in the labour force and lower rates of unemployment than people without such qualifications'.¹

Health

There is a strong correlation between education and health. Low education attainment rates have been linked to many negative health outcomes, with early school leavers twice as likely to experience a long term health problem in their life than those with higher education.² Conversely, poor health inhibits concentration and student's ability to learn, as well as leading to increased levels of absenteeism and disengagement from school.³

Social Inclusion

The social skills young people learn at school through interactions with their peers, and adults, are vital to their development and social inclusion. Education settings provide opportunities to develop social capital – the networks of reciprocal trust and quality relations between individuals and communities. Research by the Benevolent Society and the University of Western Sydney found that students with higher levels of social capital tend to show better mental and physical health; academic self-concept; a sense of belonging in the school and community; and, lower levels of perceived discrimination.⁴

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013, *Australia's Welfare 2013*, Australian Government, Canberra.

² Catholic Health Australia & National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, 2010, *Health Lies in Wealth*.

³ World Health Organisation, 2011, *Education: Shared Interests in Well-being and Development*, Social Determinants of Health Sectoral Briefing Series 2.

⁴ The Benevolent Society, *Social capital among school students in disadvantaged communities*, accessed 8 November 2012, <http://apo.org.au/research/social-capital-among-school-students-disadvantaged-communities>

Disadvantage and education

For the majority of young people in Australia their involvement in the education system will be a positive experience and lead them on to further education, training and employment. However for some young Australians, circumstances and experiences lead them to fall behind with their learning, leaving them more vulnerable to hardship later in life.

Given the impact education can have on a person's life it is vital that all young people are supported to have the same opportunities and educational outcomes as their peers. A recent report by the Committee for Economic Development on addressing entrenched disadvantage in Australia suggests that a focus on education is important because disadvantage begins early in life and education is crucial to improving equality of opportunity for all Australians.⁵

There is a clear association between socioeconomic status and average educational achievement. In Australia:

- the reading gap between the lowest socio-economic status students and the highest socio-economic status students is equivalent to almost three years of schooling.⁶
- there is a difference of the equivalent of about two and a half years of schooling between the performance of students in the top quartile of socio-economic status and those in the bottom quartile. This is the case for measures of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy.⁷
- Young people living in disadvantage have access to fewer books and learning materials at home, and their parents may not have the resources, skills or experience to support their child's education.⁸

Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances, including socio-economic status, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential, and future employment and life-long financial security.⁹

*'A well-educated population is essential to a country's economic and social development – a higher level of education means higher earnings, better health and a longer life. So it is in society's interest to ensure that all children and adults have access to a wide variety of educational opportunities.'*¹⁰

⁵ Committee for Economic Development, 2015, *Addressing Entrenched Disadvantage in Australia*.

⁶ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011, *Review of Funding for Schooling*.

⁷ Programme for International Student Assessment, 2012, *PISA In Brief: Highlights from the full Australian report*, accessed 2 July 2015, <http://www.acer.edu.au/files/PISA-2012-In-Brief.pdf>

⁸ The Smith Family, *Not all children get an equal start in life*, accessed 23 June 2015, <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/what-we-do/the-problem>

⁹ OECD, 2012, *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*, OECD Publishing.

¹⁰ OECD, 2012, *Education at a Glance 2012: Highlights*, OECD Publishing.

Education in the ACT

The ACT has a relatively high standard of education and good outcomes for most young people. Despite the level of Year 12 attainment in the ACT being above the national average,¹¹ inequities still exist in the educational achievement of disadvantaged cohorts of young Canberrans.

The extent of disadvantage in the ACT was revealed in a report released by the ACT Community Services Directorate in 2012 that used a new measure of relative socio-economic disadvantage (the Socio-Economic Indexes for Individuals or SEIFI). The report found that there were 28,639 disadvantaged people 'hidden' in the ACT due to the unique situation of having one of the highest proportions of diverse suburbs, where there are large numbers of both the most, and the least, disadvantaged people living next to each other.¹²

Similarly, educational disadvantage in the ACT can also be described as 'hidden'. As a result of the diversity within Canberra's suburbs, most ACT schools have small numbers of highly disadvantaged students, rather than disadvantage being concentrated in a few schools. This may pose a challenge for schools in responding and providing appropriate supports for the small number of students experiencing disadvantage.

Researchers in curriculum and educational systems and policy from the University of Canberra, Philip Roberts and Dr Simon Leonard, highlight the issues that arise when only looking at the average performance of students in the ACT. They suggest that the ACT relies on the large cohort of students with high socio-economic status to maintain the appearance that the ACT is leading the country when it comes to education.¹³

Results from the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that, on average, ACT students outperformed students from other states and territories across reading, mathematical and scientific literacy measures. However, relying on the ACT's comparative 'average' rank in national and international testing hides the significant inequity in the ACT's education system. Roberts and Leonard report:

*'A close examination of the PISA report shows that the ACT quickly falls to near the bottom of the nation when it comes to equity in education with only the Northern Territory showing a greater connection between SES background and PISA achievement... Especially striking is that the ACT has the biggest in-school variation linked to student SES of any Australian jurisdiction. There may not be much difference between schools, but within them students are performing very differently based on their SES background.'*¹⁴

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014, *Education and Work, Australia*, accessed 2 July 2015,

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/6227.0Main+Features1May%202014?OpenDocument>

¹² ACT Government, 2012, *Detecting Disadvantage in the ACT: Report on the comparative analysis of the SEIFI and SEIFA indexes of relative socio-economic disadvantage in the ACT*, ACT Government, Canberra.

¹³ Roberts, P. & Leonard, S., 2013, *PISA results show ACT schools fare poorly in teaching disadvantaged*, accessed 2 July 2015,

<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/pisa-results-show-act-schools-fare-poorly-in-teaching-disadvantaged-20131209-2z1xa.html>

¹⁴ Roberts, P. & Leonard, S., 2013, *PISA results show ACT schools fare poorly in teaching disadvantaged*, accessed 2 July 2015,

<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/pisa-results-show-act-schools-fare-poorly-in-teaching-disadvantaged-20131209-2z1xa.html>

Other risk factors

While socio-economic status is one risk factor, there are a range of other factors that might also impact on the ability of some young people to succeed in education. A young person may experience difficulties at school for a variety of reasons and there are likely to be multiple, intersecting issues which impact on their lives and make it difficult to remain engaged in education.

There are specific groups of young people that face significant barriers to their educational engagement and are therefore more likely to disengage from school. This includes young people who may:

- have a disability;
- have had an out of home care experience;
- identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander;
- be from a culturally and linguistically diverse background;
- be experiencing mental ill health;
- be a carer;
- be experiencing homelessness;
- identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex;
- be involved in the justice system;
- have parents who are incarcerated; and/or,
- be a young parent.

There are a variety of reasons that a young person may not be succeeding in school and more often than not, they will not fall neatly into one of the above categories.

Schools are often first-to-know agencies when it comes to identifying risk factors in a student's engagement. It is important that schools are linked in with local community services and teachers are equipped and resourced to address issues as they arise. By working together in a collaborative, cohesive way, already-established relationships can be used to support students when they need it to remain engaged in school and succeed in education.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

The gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous educational achievement and attainment rates is of particular concern, and the gap appears to widen as students get older and enter high school.

The 2014 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results show that in the ACT the gap is larger in year 9 compared to year 3 across all indicators – reading, persuasive writing, grammar and punctuation, spelling and numeracy.¹⁵ In addition, only around 64 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander year 10 students continue to year 12, compared to 90 per cent of all year 10 students in the ACT.¹⁶

The 2014 NAPLAN results also reveal that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the ACT do not perform as well as some of their urban counterparts in other states and territories. For example, 18.3 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in year 9 were below the minimum standard in reading, a higher proportion than in metropolitan areas of Victoria, Tasmania and New South Wales.¹⁷

While the NAPLAN results highlight some of the gaps that exist, there is also a need for further research into educational inequity in the ACT that takes into account the particular features of the ACT social environment. Research that considers the local context will help to identify the gaps that exist in the ACT education system, why they exist and what could be done to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other young Canberrans who may not be achieving at school.

¹⁵ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014, *National Assessment Program, Literacy and Numeracy, National Report for 2014*, ACARA, Sydney.

¹⁶ ACT Government, 2014, *A Picture of ACT's Children and Young People*, ACT Government, Canberra.

¹⁷ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014, *National Assessment Program, Literacy and Numeracy, National Report for 2014*, ACARA, Sydney.

So what?

The educational achievement of young Canberrans is everyone's business. The ACT economy, oriented primarily towards service delivery and public administration, is knowledge-based and relies on a highly educated population to support its growth.¹⁸ While on average it appears Canberra is leading the nation when it comes to education, the ACT education system is far from equitable.¹⁹

In a city in which most young people will have an educational experience that will equip them with the skills they need to participate economically, socially and politically in society, it is simply unacceptable and unsustainable that there are students falling behind, not achieving and disengaging from education in the ACT.

Educational disadvantage in the ACT is hidden and we need to be taking steps to address the inequities in the system. With the introduction of greater school autonomy, the Youth Coalition of the ACT, in partnership with ACTCOSS, is taking the opportunity to start a conversation with community sector organisations about what is needed to address educational disadvantage in the ACT and how we can work together with schools to improve equity in our education system and support all young Canberrans to succeed at school.

¹⁸ Canberra Create Your Future, *Key ACT Industries*, ACT Government, Canberra, accessed 12 January 2015, <http://www.canberrayourfuture.com.au/portal/working/article/key-act-industries/>

¹⁹ Roberts, P. & Leonard, S., 2013, *PISA results show ACT schools fare poorly in teaching disadvantaged*, accessed 2 July 2015, <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/pisa-results-show-act-schools-fare-poorly-in-teaching-disadvantaged-20131209-2z1xa.html>