



ACT Council of
Parents & Citizens
Associations

The parent voice on public education

NOTES FROM THE ACT COUNCIL OF P&C ASSOCIATIONS

HOT TOPICS/GENERAL MEETING OF 22 SEPTEMBER 2015

Attended by 13 delegates

Presentation on Outward Bound programs by Liz Grellman

Outward Bound Australia run programs for families, adults, and a 12 day 'navigator' program for 15-17 year olds. The courses provide challenging experiences to help people discover and achieve their potential. Liz outlined the types of concerns of parents which are answered by the navigator program – their child needs a challenge, needs more confidence, lacks motivation, spends too much time on electronic devices. Kids come out of these experiences feeling empowered and changed. Participants learn through experience. The programs are hard, but fun! They stretch participants and also allow time for reflection. More information from www.outwardbound.org.au.

Lyons clubs can sponsor kids to attend.

Outward Bound also run a schools programs for Year 9 students. Courses can be one day or several.

ACTION: Janelle (Council Communications Officer) to find out more about schools program and share through Council publications.

Preschool confirmations for 2016 academic year

One P&C understands that the ACT Education Directorate has advised principals explicitly not to send out any information about placements while funding arrangement are being negotiated (in regards to 12 or 15 hour week). This is a hopeless situation for parents (and principals) to be in September but from discussions it was clear that some schools had coped better than others with the uncertainty and had given at least some information to parents so they could plan. Others schools, however gave no information about 2016 preschool until this week.

This followed the announcement by Minister Burch last week that 15 hours a week of preschool was now confirmed for 2016 and 2017, a funding arrangement between Federal and ACT Governments having been reached.

ACTION: Office to note for follow up to ensure that there is not a repeat in 2017.

School class sizes, school capacity

Delegate from Hawker raised this issue in response to planned increases in class sizes next year for some year groups. Correspondence from ETD confirmed that the policy is for a maximum of 21 students in Kindergarten classes.

At Hawker, classes for year 1 and 2 will be 28, with an extra teacher in for literacy and numeracy sessions. Parents are concerned that this is not sufficient resourcing for this group. There was a discussion about the best way to progress the conversation between parents and principal about this, with good suggestions offered.

A more general discussion about class sizes followed. Class sizes ranging from 14 up to 34 kids has been experienced in ACT schools by parents at the meeting. Parents made the observation that the expertise of the teacher seems more important than the number of students for the success of the class. Managing challenging behaviour seems to be the limiting issue.

This led to a discussion about school capacity and system wide stress, with schools reaching capacity across Belconnen and Gungahlin. John Haydon (Council President) provided information from the most recent meeting with ETD executives (see attached report from this meeting). Some parents present would like information publicly available about capacity and projected numbers of students to assist them in choosing a school. Other parents have been 'left out in the cold' when PEA boundaries change.

Another issue is preschools having additional classes, which are then filled by children from neighbouring suburbs, despite the school being at capacity for K-6 (and no longer taking out-of-area enrolments for these years). The continuous enrolment from preschool means that these out-of-area children then get into these already 'full' schools.

ACTION: Office to check with ETD as to whether school capacity information can be made publicly available.

Teaching meditation to students in ACT schools

The principal of one primary school confirms that she is planning to trial a meditation program in term 4 for 8 year olds at 10 minutes per day. Similar work with other children at the school had shown enormous benefit for some students. Jennifer Sexton, a parent who runs the program, says it is opt-out and focused on mental health with no religious content. She is looking for Council's support to expand to other schools. Council executive are supportive. Parents at the meeting were all very supportive. Parents feel it is a very valuable skill for kids to learn.

ACTION (office): Council to write letter of support for a simple meditation program in schools.

IT in Primary Schools.

The delegate from Hughes PS raised questions at previous meetings about implementing Google Apps for Education (GAFE) in the primary school setting. He argues that this is a transformational change for classrooms but has not been fully discussed eg how it will be used, privacy concerns, the possibility of data exploitation, whether there are real educational benefits, whether teachers have the tools to use it well.

John outlined response to these questions from ETD executives (see report from that meeting attached). The major outcome was for ETD (Mark Huxley) to provide an article for Council magazine which answers these questions.

Some schools have obviously handled this better than other. Some parents feel school has been thrown in the deep end a bit. Others said their schools held dedicated parent information nights which explained that all data would be owned by department and destroyed when the child left school, unless parents give permission for the data to be released to a personal Google account. These parents felt confident that there had been a good process to choose GAFE.

The meeting believed that there needs to be a standard process across the schools to communicate effectively with parents, the need for transparency about the process.

Delegate didn't feel questions have been answered.

John suggested we wait for the article from Mark Huxley and see if that answers questions better. If not, council to respond with further specific questions (to be written with Andrew).

Failure of planning processes around schools

Urban open space adjacent to Giralang PS has been used as informal parking (loss of carpark with shops building site). TAMs now closing this off, but without consultation with community or with time to develop other plans. TAMs informed parent that there was no requirement to consult with parents, that the school is not a stakeholder in this 'urban open space' immediately outside the front of the school. There are concerns about the safety of alternative parking, especially near building site. P&C there have written to ACT Chief Minister and Minister for TAMs.

There seems to be no mechanism for integrated planning for the school within its community setting. Currently you have to plan each aspect separately - active travel, traffic, parking, cycle paths, buses and so on. At previous Hot Topics meeting David Jones from ETD talked about better links between departments, but these seem to depend on individuals. David Jones appears to have moved on and parents are not confident the links are still working.

Schools are not adequately considered in planning issues (eg recent processes around Telopea tennis court and Lyneham facility). Parents present said we need to push for a planning mechanism for a school within its community setting. Data from different department needs to come together and then go towards a plan and community consultation.

ACTION: Council Executive to consider at next executive meeting and decide how to pursue. Perhaps a Council working group in the area of planning is required.

Sharing expertise in running P&C Facebook pages

Janet Dawson (delegate) explained her previous experience with running Facebook (FB) group for FB administrators - a way for people managing P&C FB pages to get help, discuss ideas etc.

Not a massive response from those present. Janelle to work with Janet to promote the group to school FB community.

Parent engagement in preschools

Amanda Bichard (Council Vice President) reported that Preschool Matters grants are up for grabs and not many applications are in yet. Up to \$500 for projects to get parents involved in preschool education.

REPORT: Meeting with Education and Training Directorate (ETD)

Meeting with:	Stephen Gneil (Deputy Director-General – Office for Schools), Rodney Bray (Business Improvement Branch), Mark Huxley (Information and Knowledge Services), Tracey Stewart (Planning and Performance Branch), Catriona Smith (Ministerial Liaison Officer)
Meeting Place, Time	220 Northbourne Ave Braddon 3 September 2015 4.00 pm – 5.00 pm
P&C Attendees	Hugh Boulter, Andrew Bidwell, John Haydon
Key Issues Discussed	<p>Tracey Stewart presented on school planning as we had raised the issue of schools for Molonglo. Her branch does 1, 5 and 30 year projections. She listed strategies the directorate has for dealing with excess demand (reducing out of area enrolments, transportable buildings, modular design, changing enrolment areas, school expansion and changing the structure of the school). We noted that the 30 year projections were probably heroic, and understood that the directorate also needs to ensure it does not build unwanted schools. The college for Molonglo area is Canberra College in Woden with good bus connections.</p> <p>Rodney Bray presented on the SRA (Student Resource Allocation) program. He said needs based funding has operated in the ACT for many years but the Gonski report triggered what was in any event a much overdue re-design. He set out SRA guiding principles (fairness, transparency, school level decision making, etc) and system and school outcomes. The loading factors are the same as Gonski but no remote locality loading of course. In response to our concerns that schools will choose to avoid expensive resources (such as specialist teachers) under such a model, ETD claim that this will be prevented by the integrity of the school principal and the fact that they must deliver improved student outcomes.</p> <p>Mark Huxley addressed some of the concerns parents have expressed over the introduction of IT devices particularly in primary schools. He said the IT expenditure is increasing, not decreasing, that ETD has no preferred device (however schools do choose a preferred device) and that technology is not “something you do in a lab but an integral part of education”. He stressed that they are obliged to work within the Australian curriculum which specifies many IT learning outcomes even for primary school students. ETD selected Google Apps for Education (GAFE) in the knowledge that while it would not be able to influence Google, Google has a much wider range of educational applications than smaller players. Mark undertook to write an article we could put in Parent ACTION on IT in ACT schools so that parents could be better informed – we encouraged him to make it a warts and all picture.</p> <p>Schools have to fund translators to communicate with non-English speaking parents. Our reservations about this were met with assurances that no school would skint on translators if needed and that central funds could be provided in extremis.</p> <p>Council has generally been pleased with the learning difficulties taskforce but has concerns about the project manager position ceasing due to the withdrawal of Commonwealth funds. Stephen Gneil undertook to investigate and we gave him a copy of a draft Parent ACTION article on the taskforce explaining our position.</p>

	<p>Stephen Gneil seemed to be genuinely surprised that the word 'critical' is key to understanding the real import of the recent critical incident reporting MOU signed with private schools. We explained that the private schools are only required to report incidents of such gravity that the media will have probably already covered them, and the private schools are under no obligation to report the less serious but still concerning non-critical incidents that the public schools must report.</p> <p>The school validation team interviews the president of the P&C as an indicator of parent engagement by the school.</p>
Follow up actions:	<p>Mark Huxley will provide an article on IT in ACT schools. Stephen Gneil to advise on the learning difficulties project manager position.</p>
Follow up actions: Office	
Next meeting	tba