

Submission to NSW Department
of Education and Training

**Excellence and Innovation:
A consultation with the
community of New South Wales
on public education and training**

February 2005

The Futures Team
NSW Department of Education and Training
GPO Box 33
SYDNEY NSW 2001

28 February 2005

Dear Futures Team,

UnitingCare NSW.ACT welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NSW Department of Education and Training consultation paper Excellence and Innovation: A consultation with the community of New South Wales on public education and training.

UnitingCare NSW.ACT has a long and substantial commitment to the support and education of children and their families, particularly children in disadvantaged families and communities. Through major agencies such as UnitingCare NSW.ACT Children's Services, UnitingCare Burnside and Wesley Dalmar we provide direct care and education of children in the early years, as well as a broad range of services to children, young people and their families across all forms of intervention and support.

When considering excellence and innovation in public education and training, it is vital to consider the needs of the most disadvantaged students and their families. UnitingCare NSW.ACT recognises the crucial role that high quality, accessible, public education can play in overcoming social and economic cycles of disadvantage, and in offering equality of opportunity for all children to live a full and rewarding life.

This submission does not attempt to provide detailed responses to every question posed by the Department. It is our view that the Department has a wealth of detailed information in the form of the Vinson Report and in submissions made by (among others) UnitingCare Burnside and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in the last five years on issues facing disadvantaged communities and specific strategies for facing them. We are also aware that the Department has recently completed its Review of Aboriginal Education which contains a number of specific findings which we look forward to the Department implementing in full.

Our purpose in this submission is to support the consultation process and encourage the Department to pay greater attention to the needs of disadvantaged children in the provision of school education, and to provide some comments on principles to which the Department ought to pay greater attention.

UnitingCare NSW.ACT affirms the Department of Education's interest in excellence and innovation in public education and training and urges the Futures Team to acknowledge as a priority the needs of disadvantaged students.

Yours sincerely,



Rev. Harry J. Herbert
Executive Director

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1 About UnitingCare NSW.ACT

UnitingCare NSW.ACT is the peak body for all community services, chaplaincy, and social justice and advocacy activities of the Uniting Church in the New South Wales Synod. UnitingCare NSW.ACT is one of the Boards within the New South Wales Synod and is part of the national network of UnitingCare Australia.

Our view of social justice is guided by the Christian scriptures, theological reflection, insights of social, political and economic analysis, the statements of the Synod and Assembly, and our encounters with people and their life experiences in our work.

Through other major agencies such as UnitingCare Burnside and Wesley Dalmar, we also provide a broad range of services to children, young people and their families across all forms of intervention and support, including study centres, homework centres, and innovative forms of education for disadvantaged students such as Exodus House, High Street, Bradfield, and Claymore Integrated Project.

2 Principles in education

UnitingCare NSW.ACT understands education as a “lifelong journey by which all people develop the ability to participate in society and lead lives that are life creating and life sharing” (UCA 2002). Our vision of education is based on valuing all people as created in the image of God and on the recognition that all people have rights and responsibilities for the well being of society. We recognise the family, in particular, as having a primary role in the context of education and believe that families must be encouraged and supported to become involved in their children’s education.

The Uniting Church calls for quality education that is accessible and equitable for all and that encourages excellence in education by which the God given gifts and talents of people are fully developed. We also value diversity in educational expression and provision so that the diverse needs of all students can be met.

2.1 Comments on ‘Education as Commodity’

We welcome the declaration by the Director-General that public schools exist “to ensure that all students, regardless of background or circumstance, have the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, understandings and values for a productive and rewarding life and to contribute to the future of our democratic society as informed citizens.” (DET 2004, p4) We are however disappointed to see the Department contradictorily views education as a “commodity” in which the role of the Department is merely one of product positioning: “We are determined that public education will be the natural choice for increasing numbers of parents” (ibid, p4). As noted in the Senate last year, the outcome of this thinking has been a rapid increase in inequality in the outcomes of schooling. (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee 2004, p1) Furthermore, “In a commodified education system organised around the concept of consumer choice, the dominant ethos is that of self-interest. This threatens the contribution public schools can make to the sense of community, mutuality, and reciprocity that has been so important to advancing democracy in Australian society.” (Reid 2003) We urge the Department to repudiate the language and logic of “education as commodity”.

2.2 Education and Human Rights

Every child has the right to quality education that meets their needs and aspirations, and children facing social, cultural and economic disadvantages require additional support in their education and training (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). Public Education providers are also required to model justice and respect for human rights (including those specified in CROC) within services, provide additional support to those people whose human rights are violated or at risk and teach understanding of and respect for human rights within the curriculum.

2.3 Education and Disadvantaged Communities

Education and training should be provided on the principle of *equality of opportunity*, since “educational success is perhaps the single most important factor in overcoming disadvantage in childhood” (Burnside 2002, p6) and enabling children to live a more fulfilling life.

Providing quality public education and training for all, especially for the most disadvantaged, benefits the whole community, not just the individuals and families involved. Without such education and training, social disadvantage and exclusion results in increased instances of child abuse and neglect, mental health disorders, youth suicide, substance misuse, and increased crime (Vinson 2004, p4).

Quality education and training, therefore, play a critical role in breaking the cycle of disadvantage faced by many different groups in our society. These disadvantaged groups require the very best educational opportunities possible in order to redress the effects of abuse, discrimination, lack of access to resources, and the associated trauma and social alienation that results.

Until these needs and aspirations have been meaningfully addressed, it will not be possible for the Department to talk seriously about “[ensuring] that in *every school*, and in *every classroom*, there is high quality education for *every student*.” (DET 2004, p38)

3 Strategies to meet the needs and aspirations of disadvantaged groups in public education and training

UnitingCare NSW.ACT believes enough has been said in the last few years to draw the Department's attention to the particular needs of disadvantaged students and concrete strategies for addressing them. We welcome the Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (2004) and the independent Review of Aboriginal Education Policy (2004), and urge the Department to implement the recommendations contained within them as a matter of priority. We also draw the Department's attention to the submissions made by UnitingCare Burnside over the last five years, as well as their submission to this inquiry which seeks to ensure the views of disadvantaged communities is heard directly by the Futures Team.

UnitingCare NSW.ACT also believes that the Vinson Report (2002) provides strategies for overall improvement of the provision of public education in NSW for the coming decade. We understand Professor Vinson is currently conducting an audit of progress in implementation of its recommendations which will provide further substantive information to the Department. We are concerned the purpose of this consultation may be to crowd out the recommendations of these reports by providing yet another set of recommendations before the Department has had adequate time to implement and be accountable to them.

What is obvious from previous reports and submissions is that the Department needs to focus its thinking around three key areas (matched to your questions):

3.1 Access

To achieve excellence and innovation in public education and training DET should:

- Provide public education for all children in accordance with the human right to education as recognised by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other UN documents to which Australia is a party;
- Provide services that are flexible and responsive to the diversity of learning styles and needs of students (4a); and
- Adopt an inter-agency approach to early intervention programs such as *Families First* to reduce inequalities in pre-school children's literacy and numeracy (2a)

3.2 Equity

To achieve excellence and innovation in public education and training DET should:

- Provide adequate capital and recurrent funding (see for example the Vinson report) to ensure that all public school teachers and students have access to the best available curriculum resources and supports (16a, 16b);
- Allocate resources according to need, with extra resources going to schools with students from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs (2b, 3a, 5g);
- Ensure that the priority for use of government resources is the funding of public rather than private schools (5c, 16a, 16b); and
- Prioritise efforts to reduce the gap between the highest and lowest performing students to OECD-leading standards (16a)

3.3 Participation

To achieve excellence and innovation in public education and training DET should:

- Enable schools which should be catering to Indigenous children to build effective relationships with the Indigenous communities and families so that children and their families participate in education and to ensure culturally sensitive education (2c, 11a; cf. Aboriginal Education Review 2004);

- Provide alternative learning environments such as Community Schools¹ and Exodus House² and teachers with relevant skills to encourage the participation of young people who currently drop out of school (5e, 6a-6e);
- Draw on the expertise of teachers as experts in their fields (8c, 16b);
- Equip students not simply for employment or in accordance with the wishes of their families, but also for responsible participation in civil society (5g, 11b);
- Involve students when making decisions that affect them (10e); and
- Encourage students to participate in the life of the wider community (11b, 14a)

4 References

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New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and the Department of Education and Training 2004, *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education*

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Reid, Alan 2003, *Public Education as a Public Good*, speech given at the launch of the Australian Education Union (South Australian branch) Public Education Project. Quoted from http://www.nswtf.org.au/journal_extras/reid.html

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee 2004, *Report on Commonwealth Funding for Schools*, Senate Printing Unit, Canberra

UnitingCare Burnside 2002, *Foundations for Learning: A new vision for New South Wales?* North Parramatta

Uniting Church in Australia 2002, *National Education Charter*, Uniting Education, Sydney

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989

Vinson, Tony 2002 *Public Education in New South Wales: Report of the 'Vinson Inquiry'*, Pluto Press, Annandale

Vinson, Tony 2004 *Community Adversity and Resilience: The distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales and the mediating role of social cohesion*, The Ignatius Centre for Social Policy and Research, Sydney

¹ See the *Review of Aboriginal Education recommendation 16*

² Exodus House caters for students who are living in refuges and are not able to access any other educational program and is run by the Exodus Foundation in Ashfield