

OPINION

Schools are entrenching inequality in our society

Trevor Cobbold, 6 February 2008

There was an orgy of self-congratulation by the ACT Government following the publication of national school results last week. In the extravagance, some irksome realities were ignored.

The Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services shows that the ACT has a high-quality school system by national and international standards. We have the highest average results in the nation in literacy and numeracy in the primary and early secondary years, and we have the highest retention rates to Year 12.

The ACT also has among the highest average results internationally for 15-year olds in reading, mathematics and science. The proportion of students achieving at unsatisfactory levels is significant, but relatively low.

The Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, and the Minister for Education, Andrew Barr, have quite rightly lauded these results.

However, they ignored another central message of the 2007 and 2008 Report on Government Services the ACT has a highly inequitable school system.

The reports reveal a large achievement gap some would say chasm in school results between rich and poor in our community.

More than half of ACT students from low-income families are below the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development average in reading, mathematics and science compared with less than 30 per cent of all students. For example, 53 per cent of low-income students are below the OECD average in reading compared with 26 per cent of all students. In science, 55 per cent of low-income students are below the OECD average compared with 29 per cent of all students.

It must be emphasised that these large achievement gaps are between students from low-income families and all students. They imply much larger gaps between students from low and high-income families.

The achievement gaps in the ACT are also increasing. They increased by 35, 109 and 18 per cent respectively in reading, mathematics and science since they were last measured.

The large part of the increases was caused by higher percentages of low-income students in the ACT performing below the OECD average. This suggests serious neglect of the needs of these students by the Government and the school system.

The ACT has by far the largest achievement gaps in Australia for reading, mathematics and science. For example, the gap for reading of 27 percentage points

is double the average for Australia. However, these comparisons may be overstated, because the rest of Australia has a larger proportion of low-income students.

In his profuse self-congratulations, Barr also made much of the high retention rate to Year 12 in the ACT. While true, it distracts attention from a worrying feature of senior secondary schooling. This is a relatively high drop-out rate that is obscured by the enrolment of substantial numbers of students in colleges from other school systems in the ACT and NSW.

The ACT budget papers show that 15 per cent of Year 10 students in government schools do not proceed to Year 11 and a further 15 per cent of Year 12 students do not receive a Year 12 Certificate. A review of colleges in 2005 found that about 20 per cent of each Year 11 cohort does not receive a Year 12 Certificate.

These figures suggest that 30 per cent or more of each Year 10 cohort do not complete Year 12. While some of these students transfer to other school systems or find employment, many do not achieve the standard of education required for a successful employment career and adult life.

National research shows that students from low-income families are much more likely to drop out of school before completing Year 12 than high-income students. Clearly, there are serious inequities in ACT education. They should be reduced for several reasons.

Differential access to education blights a democratic society. It means that some social groups are consistently discriminated against in providing opportunities for rewarding livelihoods and successful participation in adult society. Large disparities in school outcomes for students from different social backgrounds entrench inequality and discrimination in society.

Students from more privileged backgrounds have greater access to higher incomes, higher status occupations and positions of wealth, influence and power in society than students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

The ACT Government is a signatory to the National Goals for Schooling which includes a social equity goal to reduce differences in school outcomes arising from students' socio-economic background. It requires that the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students and indigenous students match those of other students

Employer organisations in the ACT are concerned about skill shortages in the workforce. Reducing the achievement gap in school outcomes would assist in alleviating these shortages.

The large disparity in school outcomes indicates a waste of talents, skills and resources. It is, in effect, a measure of the potential to improve workforce skills and productivity.

Reducing the achievement gap is the most important challenge facing the ACT school system. It requires a comprehensive strategy involving targeting funding to learning

need, changes in curriculum and teaching and individual school plans to reduce the gap. It should be a bi-partisan policy priority.

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