

Annual Human Rights Day Community Forum

The New Right to Education

Address by Andrew Wrigley, Executive Director, Association of Independent Schools of the ACT

'A non-Government Perspective'

Good afternoon.

Thank you for the invitation to participate in today's Forum.

About AISACT

The Association on Independent Schools of the ACT represents all 17 independent schools here in Canberra. These Independent schools are a diverse group of non-Government schools servicing a range of different communities.

Many of the independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy. Here in Canberra there is also an independent school which specialises in providing an alternative education program for disadvantaged and at-risk young people.

Independent schools are not-for-profit institutions. They are generally established in response to community need – as I have said, the examples include schools that seek to reflect the religious values of a particular community, practice an internationally recognised educational philosophy, special schools, and indeed boarding schools.

All are registered with the Education and Training Directorate to operate as schools, and undertake a rigorous process every 5 years to be re-registered to operate as a school.

Independent schooling has a long and proud history of education in Canberra, starting in the 1920s prior to the opening of (Old) Parliament House. Today our schools educate over 13,700 students in 17 schools ranging in sizes from 20 students to over 1600 students. One in five ACT kindergarten – Year 12 students attends an independent school, and combined the non-government sector (that is, Independent and Catholic Education Office schools) educates over forty percent of students in the ACT.

Enrolments in independent schools in the ACT have been growing steadily for many years. From 2005 to 2012 there has been a 20% growth in student numbers. It is important to note here that the proportion of enrolments in the sectors varies between primary, high school and college levels of education in the ACT.

Our schools

Independent schools reflect the diversity of Canberra society. As I noted just a moment ago, many independent schools are faith based schools, and they enrol students from a diverse range of religions, regions and social backgrounds. In the mix of ACT independent schools, there are:

- 4 Anglican schools
- 4 Christian schools

- 3 Catholic schools
- 2 schools of specialist educational philosophy; Montessori and Steiner
- 1 community based school
- 1 Islamic school
- 1 Seventh Day Adventist school
- 1 special needs school

Ten schools educate indigenous students, and eleven schools educate identified students with a disability, with the number of these students in those schools ranging from one, to 63 students.

And the diversity of school populations is not just in evidence between schools, but also within them. One school reports a diverse population with over 30 different faith traditions represented on the enrolment register; Anglican, Catholic, Atheist, No Religion, Islam, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Quaker and one family identifies their religion as Jedi Knight!

These schools reflect the diversity of the wider Canberra community. Co-educational schooling is the most common in the independent sector, however single-gender schools remain a feature, with 4 of the 17 schools being single gender.

There are no selective independent schools in the ACT. Enrolment policies are, in general, similar in that they mostly relate to the order in which registration of a child at a school occurs.

A criticism sometimes directed at religious schools in the independent sector is that because they allow students to segregate into more homogenous groups, and because religious instruction may have strict stances on morality and behaviour, they create intolerance and undermine social harmony. In her paper 'The Rise of Religious Schools', Jennifer Buckingham states that " Although testing on this assumption is scarce, existing evidence suggests that this is not the case. People who have attended non-government schools (which are usually religious schools) do not express opinions that are less socially liberal or less tolerant of difference than students who have attended government schools. On some issues, the opposite is the case. People who attend non-government schools actually have higher rates of civic participation than people who attend government schools." (Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2005) Australian Social Science Data Archive – quoted in The Rise of Religious Schools, Jennifer Buckingham).

Summary

The right of parents to take an active role in the education of their children and their right to choose the educational environment that best suits the needs of their children are important freedoms that Australians value highly. These values help to explain the diversity of the independent school sector.

School autonomy is vital to sustain this diversity and offer meaningful choice to parents.

The diversity within the sector makes the role and use of aspects of discrimination laws such as religious exemptions, extremely complex. Independent schools would be keen to ensure

that nothing is done, or proposed, which would impact on the operation and autonomy of independent schools.

The Right to Education is clear that 'to ensure the religious and moral education of a child in conformity with the convictions of the child's parent or guardian, the parent or guardian may choose schooling for the child (other than schooling provided by the government) that conforms to the minimum educational standards required under the law.'