

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 521#

ABANDONED PUBLIC SCHOOLS OCCUPIED BY MUSLIM SCHOOLS

3 August 2013

As public schools are starved of funds and abandoned, aggressive religious groups are happy to take them over.

The Gonski Plan has been rejected by a number of State Governments, notably those in Victoria and Western Australia. This means that Catholic and Independent schools, who have signed up, will get billions of dollars in taxpayer funds to expand their schools while public schools are starved, and abandoned. Federal president of the union Angelo Gavrielatos said unless Dr Naphine signed up, additional money would flow to Victoria's Catholic and independent schools - which have both struck funding deals with the Commonwealth in recent weeks - while "public schools will not get a single additional Gonski dollar".

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<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/federal-election-2013/catholic-sector-signs-up-to-school-funding-reforms-20130723-2qfjp.html>

Mr Dixon, the Minister for Education in Victoria and his erstwhile colleagues in the Catholic Education Office can only be content. After all, the Catholic Church has never accepted the ideals of the nineteenth century Enlightenment that every child should be educated, in a high quality public school at public expense. They believe in a denominational system – at public expense of course.

But a denominational system is a sectarian system. It is not surprising that another religious group is waiting in the wings to pick up the abandoned public schools.

There are two obvious examples: One in Mernda, Victoria, the other in Spence, Canberra.

The Mernda Example: In Mernda VCAT went against the residents and Whittlesea Council to support a group of Shia Muslims. The following is a report on the decision: AN ATTEMPT by Whittlesea Council to block an Islamic group's plans for a historic precinct in Mernda has been overturned by the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

The proposed Mayfield Heritage Precinct Development Plan was prepared by the Great Prophet Centre, primarily to allow the organisation to build a private school - which will incorporate Arabic language classes - at 1325 Plenty Rd, a former school house.

>>What do you think about the decision? Have your say below.

The plan also proposed a blueprint for future development around three 19th-century buildings.

The council received 2050 submissions objecting to the Mayfield plan last year and 2010 names and signatories supporting it.

The majority of Whittlesea councillors voted to refuse the draft plan during a council meeting in March last year, even though council officers endorsed it.

Whittlesea Council's director of planning and major projects Steve O'Brien said the group would still need to submit an application in accordance with the Development Plan.

"The ruling goes against concerns raised by over 2000 individuals around traffic issues that will result from a school being built in an area that does not have the roads required to manage the increased number of vehicles," Mr O'Brien said.

"Other statutory requirements, such as building approval and school registration will then need to be met before construction can commence."

The tribunal hearing was held on June 25 before Rachel Naylor.

According to the hearing transcript, the council expressed concern over the use of the site as a school, potential traffic and parking problems and the impact the school development could have on heritage values.

But Ms Naylor overruled the council and approved the Mayfield plan with a number of minor changes.

A spokesman for the Great Prophet Centre, Hassan Al-Khirsany, said the group would now forge ahead with its plan for a private school in the area.

"It is a small school, traffic won't be a problem," Mr Al-Khirsany said.

He said that once the school was established his organisation would search for another site in Whittlesea that was suitable for a secondary college.

Mr Al-Khirsany said the primary school was expected to open in January, 2014 and would take up to 125 students of all nationalities and religions.

Mr O'Brien said the tribunal's decision enabled the applicant to lodge a planning application for the school.

See: <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/leader/north/islamic-centre-in-mernda-gets-green-light/story-fnglenug-1226679661138>

Canberra Example.

In Canberra, the Minister permitted a Muslim School to set up in temporary accommodation in an abandoned public school.

The following is a report from Save Our Schools Canberra:

Registration of New Islamic School Should be Postponed

Friday August 2, 2013

Save Our Schools has called on the ACT Education Minister, Joy Burch, to postpone consideration of the application of At-Taqwa Islamic school for provisional registration until the school obtains a permanent site other than its temporary location in Spence.

The revelation that the new Islamic school will be located temporarily in Spence shows that the Minister's secret approval of the school last December, along with two other private schools, was premature. Approval for the school was given before its location was known so that the implications for existing schools in the area have not been properly assessed. There is a very real danger that the school's location in Spence may become permanent and impact on the viability of existing schools in the area.

The lack of a permanent location for the school shows that the Minister managed the in-principle approval process ineptly. It once again demonstrates the need to strengthen the legislative and administrative process for the approval of new private schools as recommended by the ACT ALP Conference last weekend.

The ACT Directorate of Education and Training has announced that the new At-Taqwa Islamic school will be located in Spence. The site is the old Spence primary school closed in 1997 and now occupied by the Mt. Rogers Community Centre.

The Minister for Education gave in-principle approval for the new school even though it did not have a proposed location when it made its application. The application said the school would be somewhere in Belconnen or Gungahlin.

It is understood that the Government has agreed to the At-Taqwa Islamic School being located in Spence for one year while it continues to search for a long-term site. In the meantime, the school will be housed in demountables on the Spence site.

Clearly, the Minister approved the new school prematurely. If the school cannot acquire another site, the Government may have little choice but to house it at Spence permanently.

It is entirely possible that will be the case. The school has been unable to find a site after searching for over 18 months. Indeed, once the school is granted provisional registration it will have some incentive not to find another site as there is a Muslim multi-purpose venue in the Mt. Rogers Community Centre which is used for devotional, educational and leisure activities. The Government may find itself boxed into a corner and have to eject the current tenants at the centre so as to accommodate the school permanently.

If the school is located in Spence for some time or permanently it could have consequences for existing schools which were not considered as part of the original assessment of the in-principle approval application.

The Education Act requires that applications for in-principle approval of new private schools must be assessed for their possible impact on the viability of existing schools. However, it was not possible to fully assess impact at the time because the school did not specify a location in its application. Yet, the Minister went ahead and approved the school without a thorough impact assessment.

The proposed enrolment of the At-Taqwa Islamic School is 800 students by 2022. A new school of this size could have a significant effect on the viability of existing schools, especially in North Belconnen. It is an area of low student growth and substantial excess school capacity.

Internal enrolment data of the Directorate of Education and Training obtained under a FOI request by SOS show that there are currently over 900 excess spaces in government primary schools in North Belconnen. Average capacity utilisation in the area is only 74 per cent. There are also about 800 excess spaces in the two high schools in the area with an average capacity utilisation of only 49 per cent.

Even slow growth in the new school could add to the excess capacity in the area and threaten the viability of several existing schools. For example, capacity utilisation at nearby Giralang PS, which only just escaped closure in 2006, is only 40 per cent. Capacity utilisation at Mt. Rogers PS in the same suburb as the new school is 61 per cent. Capacity utilisation at Kaleen HS is only 28 per cent. Pre-schools in the area also have considerable excess space.

While the new school would draw enrolments largely or almost entirely from the Muslim population, it could have a major impact on some existing schools. According to the Directorate of Education and Training there are well over 1000 students in other government and private schools (other than the Islamic School in Weston) identifying as Muslim or Islamic. The original application by the school for in-principle approval states that over 40 per cent of its expected enrolments in 2014 will come from the Belconnen area and that it expects that about 180 of its students in 2017 will be from Belconnen.

Growth in the student population in Belconnen is projected at only 0.3 per cent a year to 2021. The population of the 5-9 age-group in the region is projected to increase by only 50 over this period. Therefore, a new school of 180 or more enrolments by 2017 in Spence is likely to have a very significant impact on the numbers in some other schools in the area.

In view of the potential implications for existing schools if Spence became the permanent site for the At-Taqwa Islamic school, Save Our Schools calls on the Minister to postpone

assessment of the application for provisional registration until such time as the school can obtain a permanent site elsewhere.

Another issue of concern is that if the school remains on the Spence site it will be another case of a closed government school in North Belconnen handed over to a private school, just as the site of the old Charnwood HS is to be given to Brindabella Christian College. This is contrary to formal ALP policy.

In conclusion, Save Our Schools emphasises that it is not opposed in principle to the establishment of another Islamic school in Canberra. It has just as much right to apply for registration and government funding as any other private school. Our main concerns relate to the future location of the school and its impact on existing schools and the Minister's failure to follow statutory requirements in granting in-principle approval. The SOS submission to the Minister on the school's application for in-principle approval opposed its location in Belconnen but did not oppose it being located in Gunghalin.

Trevor Cobbold

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