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14 September 2018

To whom it may concern,

Thank-you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the ACT Education Directorate's review of the *Suspension, Transfer or Exclusion in ACT Public School Policy* (the revised Policy), and its associated Procedure and Guidelines for Schools.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT (the Youth Coalition) is the peak body for youth affairs in the ACT, representing the rights, interests and wellbeing of young Canberrans aged 12-25 and those who work with them. We undertake policy analysis, sector development, advocacy, research and projects that respond to ongoing and current issues. One of our key roles is to develop and analyse the social policy and program decisions that affect young people and youth services in the ACT, and to facilitate linkages and collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people.

In general, we welcome the revised Policy's focus on a prevention and early intervention approach to behaviour support, towards establishing responsive environments within schools, and the recognition that alternatives to out of school suspension may result in better social, emotional and learning outcomes for students. We understand that suspension, transfer and exclusion of students is a highly complex area, and that schools have a responsibility to provide safe environments for all students and staff.

Below, we provide brief comments on the revised Policy, in relation to prevention and early intervention support, monitoring and evaluation, and implementing effective restorative practices in schools. Our feedback aims to further strengthen the potential for the Policy to improve outcomes for students.

### **Prevention and Early Intervention Supports**

The Youth Coalition supports the explicit focus in the revised Policy on strengthening prevention and early intervention measures, to reduce the incidence of behaviours that may potentially lead to suspension. This aligns the revised Policy with both the *ACT Education Directorate Strategic Plan 2018-2021*, and the foundations of *The Future of Education* strategy, which includes placing students at the centre of their learning, building strong communities for learning, and strengthening systems to focus on equity with quality.

*The Future of Education* strategy takes a holistic view of students, positioning schools as 'multi-service environments' that meet academic and wellbeing needs. As such, wording in the revised Policy could be strengthened to align its intent more closely with *The Future of Education*, including to clarify that prevention and early intervention is focused on the holistic needs and wellbeing of the student, rather than aspects of behaviour change.

As recognised in *The Future of Education*, effective prevention and early intervention requires collaborative partnerships with community organisations to allow schools to be 'community hubs'. There is an opportunity to directly align the revised Policy with Phase 1 of *The Future of Education*, which will identify, build upon and trial effective community school models that partner with community agencies and businesses to ensure schools support student and family needs.

In order for prevention and early intervention to most effectively address student needs, it is critical that service systems, including those embedded within the education system, are adequately resourced to intervene early in the life of presenting issues, before they escalate. Community organisations are often well placed to address a range of student needs and are not constrained by school hours. The Youth Coalition has advocated for several years for an increased investment in community organisations by the ACT Government, in order to increase their capacity to meet increasing demands from schools.

### **Monitoring and Evaluation of the revised Policy**

Information about the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms outlined in the draft Policy is limited, and does not provide adequate information about how the implementation of the Policy will be evaluated to assess whether the proposed changes have led to improved outcomes for students.

We note that under the *Safe and Supportive Schools Policy*, it is currently the responsibility of school staff, including principals, to evaluate the effectiveness of, and then make modifications and improvements to:

- the school's social and emotional learning approach;
- processes and procedures to address bullying, harassment and violence;
- restorative and disciplinary measures.<sup>1</sup>

We understand that these processes are supported by the Director of School Improvement, and broader data collection processes. However, this is not clearly articulated in either the revised Policy, or the *Safe and Supportive Schools Policy*. Under the evaluation responsibilities outlined in the *Safe and Supportive Schools Policy*, the potential to conduct a robust, system-wide evaluation of restorative and disciplinary measures may be compromised if evaluation methods and methodology are not used consistently across all schools; and present a conflict of interest if evaluation processes are designed, led and implemented by school staff and principals who have also been involved in the delivery of restorative and disciplinary measures.

While this has implications for the review of the *Safe and Supportive Schools Policy* in 2019, the opportunity remains to embed appropriate evaluation processes in relation to the revised Policy, including as part of developing an evaluation framework for *The Future of Education*, and for Phase 1 of *The Future of Education*, which includes an action to "develop and implement a model for 'research and development' schools to identify and build upon evidence-based approaches and interventions that successfully address student learning and

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<sup>1</sup> ACT Education Directorate. (2016). *Safe and Supportive Schools Policy*, Section 5: Responsibilities. Canberra: ACT Government.

wellbeing needs”<sup>2</sup>. The need for appropriate evaluation is further reinforced by the commitment in the Education Directorate’s Strategic Plan, to plan ‘for evaluation at the commencement of a reform or improvement intervention’ under the goal of ‘Evidence-informed decisions’, and will contribute to the Strategy’s indicators of success for this goal.<sup>3</sup>

Developing an evaluation plan for the revised Policy that extends across schools and the Education Support Office will support the Education Directorate to define the impact of the shift towards prevention and early intervention on suspensions and broader student outcomes. It will also provide an opportunity to share good practice across schools and identify schools that require additional support; evaluate the use and effectiveness of specific elements of the Policy; and identify areas for systemic improvement across the Directorate.

The Education Directorate’s Strategic Plan also specifies the need to gather qualitative feedback from diverse sources, including students and families with complex needs. An evaluation plan for the revised Policy should engage with young people and their families or other support people, who have been affected by the implementation of the Policy, to provide their feedback about how these processes are working in practice, how well they felt supported throughout the process, and areas for improvement.

### **Implementing effective restorative practice in schools**

The Youth Coalition supports the appropriate use of restorative practices in schools, noting that in relation to its implementation within school settings, the evidence currently lags behind practice. However, as a process that aims to repair and build relationships, its use within schools is promising and international studies have found that it can lead to a significant reduction in suspensions.<sup>4</sup>

It is our understanding that within the ACT, training and professional development for school staff in relation to restorative practice is initiated by schools, rather than administered by the Education Support Office. As a process founded upon relationships and collaboration, it is critical that school staff who are involved in implementing restorative practices have high-level communication skills, and a deep understanding of the power dynamics that exist between adults and students, and particularly so for vulnerable young people with complex needs.

The Victorian Education Department highlights that if implemented badly or by inadequately trained practitioners, restorative practices may result in further negative outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Best practice guidelines from the UK outline the core knowledge and skills required for restorative practice, including (but not limited to) effective and confident

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<sup>2</sup> ACT Education Directorate. (2018). Future of Education Strategy. Canberra: ACT Government, p 11.

<sup>3</sup> ACT Education Directorate. (2018). Strategic Plan 2018-21: A Leading Learning Organisation. Canberra: ACT Government, p 8.

<sup>4</sup> Song, S., & Swearer, S. (2016). The Cart Before the Horse: The Challenge and Promise of Restorative Justice Consultation in Schools, *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 26:4, 313-324.

<sup>5</sup> Victorian Education and Training Department. (2013). Restorative Practice: The 6 Methods of Intervention. Melbourne: Victoria State Government.



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communication and personal skills, the ability to create a safe environment, and a high level of self-awareness.<sup>6</sup> A review of the limited evidence relating to restorative practices in schools emphasised the importance of providing training to school staff in both the intervention and effective implementation practices.<sup>7</sup>

As such, given the significant potential of restorative practice to act as a positive alternative to disciplinary measures, but also the critical need to ensure it is implemented well, it would be appropriate for the Education Support Office to provide leadership to schools in best practice implementation of restorative justice, and to facilitate access to appropriate training and professional development for school staff and principals. As highlighted above, evaluating such initiatives is also essential, to measure the effectiveness of restorative practices and whether it contributes to improved outcomes for students.

Thank-you for providing the opportunity to give feedback on the revised Policy. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you would like to discuss the issues raised in this submission further.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Justin Barker", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Justin Barker

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<sup>6</sup> Restorative Justice Council. (2011). Best Practice Guidance for Restorative Practice. UK: Ministry of Justice.

<sup>7</sup> Song, S., & Swearer, S. (2016). *ibid.*