



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA (Chair), Mr Jonathan Davis MLA (Deputy Chair),
Mr Peter Cain MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure

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Committee Chair
Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
Canberra ACT 2601

To whom it may concern,

Please find attached a submission into the Committee's inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure from the Majura Primary School Parents and Citizens Association (Majura P&C). Majura P&C represents the parents of Watson Preschool and Majura Primary School located in Watson in Canberra's inner north. The Priority Enrolment Area for Watson Preschool and Majura Primary are the suburbs Watson and Downer.

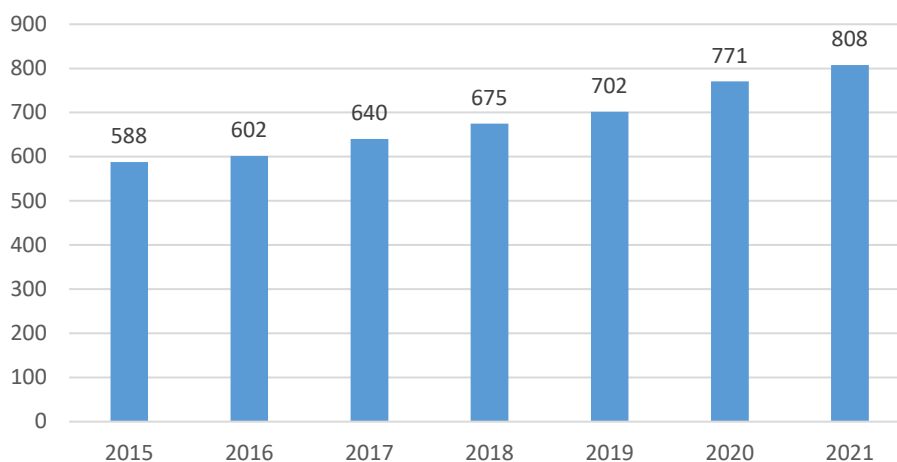
Lack of wholistic planning for school capacity

While the Education Directorate has implemented some responses to the issue of capacity within our area including the installation of demountables, changes to the PEA for Ainslie school and limiting out of area enrolments to the school there is a lack of wholistic planning to manage school capacity across inner north primary and high schools. There remains a real crisis in school capacity across the inner north of the ACT which the Education Directorate is doing little to address in any long-term wholistic manner.

The Majura community is deeply concerned about the continued influx of enrolments into the school and where the students will be accommodated both at our school and in their transition to high school. In early 2021 the Majura P&C ran a survey amongst parents at the school and 95.5% of respondents rated as 'very important' or 'important' *concerns with overcrowding at Majura Primary School*. A further 85.55% rated as 'very important' or 'important' *concerns with where their child would attend high school after leaving Majura*.

In 2015 Majura Primary had a total enrolment of 588 students. So far in 2021 the number of enrolments exceeds 800 and continues to grow throughout the year. This represents a 35.59% increase in enrolments to Majura Primary over the past 6 years.

Majura Primary School enrolments

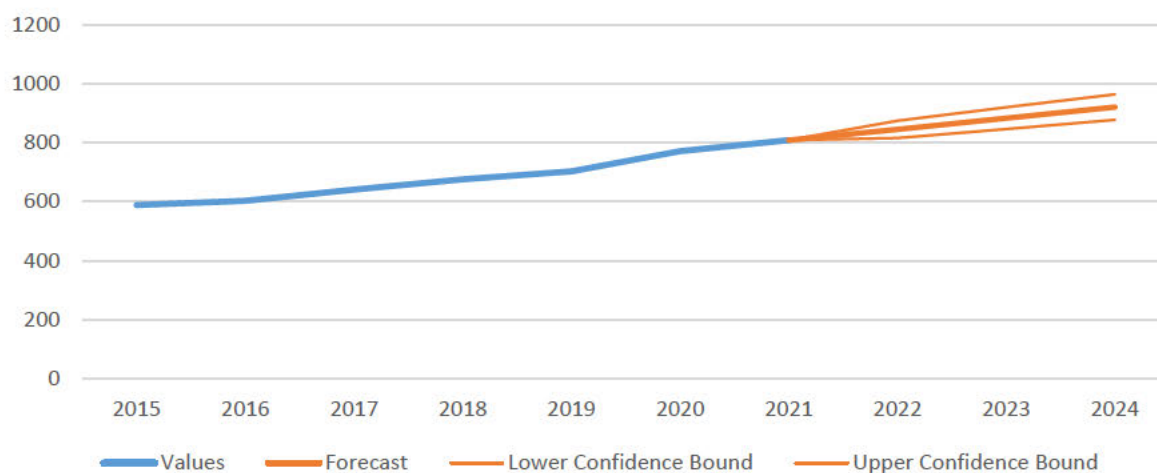


Source: [Census of ACT Schools 2015-2020 reports](#) and [2021 figures taken from Majura News Term 1 week 1](#).



Recent media reporting suggests that the Directorate is forecasting 918 enrolments in Majura Primary by 2030¹. However, based on enrolment trends over the past 7 years it is possible that Majura Primary could in fact have 924 enrolments by 2024 not 2030. Given the number of new dwellings slated for construction within 'new Watson' alone, and densification along the tram corridor it is certain that capacity will remain an issue for the foreseeable future.

Majura Primary forecasted enrolments to 2024



The issue of capacity is not limited to Majura Primary School, it is apparent in enrolments at a number of primary and high schools in the region. The Education Directorate has published figures that show an additional 579 primary aged students are expected to enrol across all inner north primary schools by 2030². If many primary schools in the inner north are at or near capacity then it is reasonable to assume that this problem will flow through to high school as children grow up. And the two inner north high schools are already over or very near capacity.

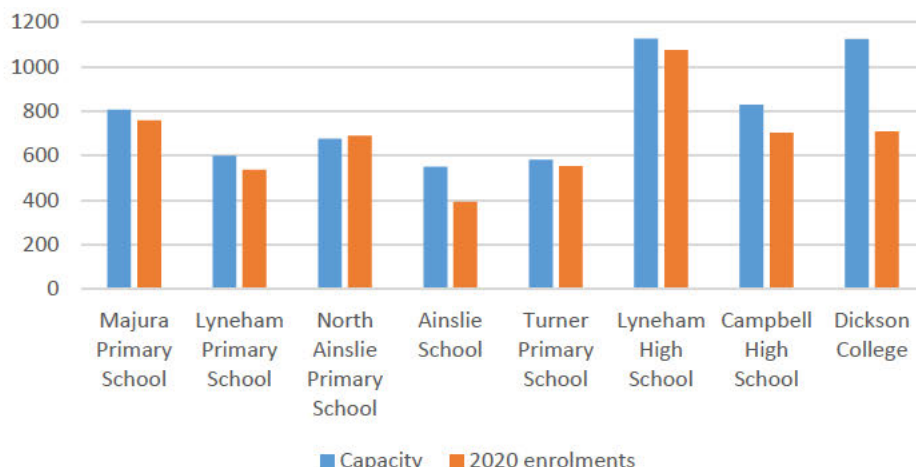
This demands urgent action from the Directorate now, not in 10 years' time. Pressure is already being felt across a number of public schools in the area. The Majura P&C has reviewed the enrolment data from the most recently published Census of ACT Schools which was released in February 2020 which shows that many schools are at or near capacity already.

¹ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7213908/new-enrolment-zones-aim-to-lighten-load-for-booming-inner-north-schools/?cs=14225> accessed 19 April 2021.

² <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7212257/inner-north-could-need-new-school-within-10-years-enrolment-data-suggests/?cs=14225> accessed 19 April 2021.

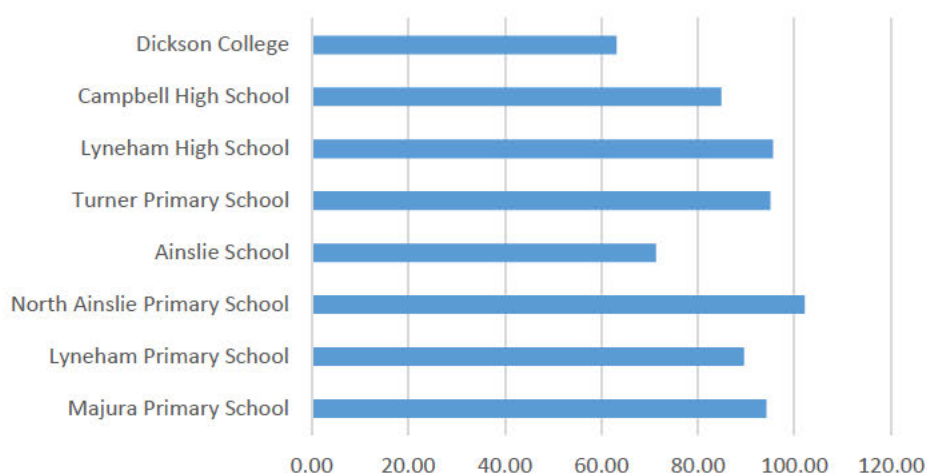


Inner north 2020 capacity vs enrolments



Note: With installation of demountables in 2021, Majura primary's capacity is now calculated as 906.

Capacity %



Source: [Census of ACT Schools February 2020](#)

This issue has arisen gradually but the Directorate has seemingly been taken by surprise if the lack of action to address the issue is any indicator. There has been no meaningful consultation with Majura P&C or school community more broadly on the issue of capacity and forward planning for our school.

Media reporting in 2014 indicated that the government forecasted growth in public schools to increase by 9% to 2017 with the fastest growth being experienced in the inner north and Gungahlin³. According to media articles from 2018, Majura Primary was already over 80% capacity in that year⁴ – when enrolments were 675 students.

³ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6137020/overcrowding-looms-as-act-public-schools-reach-capacity/> accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁴ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6120943/what-canberras-inner-north-needs-to-cope-with-growth/> accessed on 6 April 2021.



In 2018 it was reported that enrolments in public schools over independent schools in the ACT had grown 13% in the previous 4 years.⁵ The ACT Treasury forecast that population growth across the inner north would increase by 9.8% over the period 2018-2022.⁶ Also in 2018, a consultant to the ACT Government's redevelopment of Section 72 in Dickson forecast that growth in the inner north region would require the construction of an additional primary school in the area with expansions of capacity for both Lyneham and Campbell high schools⁷.

Sales of former primary school sites to developers for medium density housing, such as the Downer Primary School, will serve to exacerbate rather than mitigate the issue. It is reported that there are currently an additional 2500 additional dwellings are in construction across the inner north with 5000 extra dwellings in various stages of approval.

Despite independent reporting, and clear evidence of increased enrolments across the network over a number of years there have been no announcements from the Education Directorate of any wholistic plans for dealing with forecast increased populations across the inner north of Canberra. Parents with children in later years of primary school are reporting that their children are growing anxious about which high school they will attend given the clear pressures on the existing schools. There has been no engagement with the Majura School parent community to address concerns with school capacity both for primary and high school.

Reliance on demountables or loss of specialist teaching spaces

Instead of addressing school capacity in a wholistic manner the Education Directorate seems to take an annual approach to planning for school capacity. This means the school and parent body has to advocate annually to 'quarantine' specialist teaching spaces and seek provision of appropriate learning spaces for all students.

In 2021 Majura Primary secured two demountables with four classrooms. However, these are already housing four classes and with continued growth in enrolments more classroom spaces are likely to be needed in the next year or two. The provision of demountables should have considered likely classroom requirements for teaching space for the next few years rather than just 2021.

Parents become frustrated by the continuous need to advocate to protect specialist teaching spaces – like the performing arts room, teacher resource rooms or the library from being converted into classrooms due to a failure by the Directorate to adequately plan for future enrolments. Teacher resource rooms provide an opportunity for teachers to collaborate on lesson planning and loss of the teacher resource rooms doesn't support modern teaching practice. These specialist spaces are highly valued aspects of our school community and should be enhanced and extended to cope with additional demand rather than converted into teaching spaces.

Anecdotal feedback from other inner north P&C's suggests a number of schools in the region have also lost specialist teaching spaces and are reliant on demountables to manage school capacity.

Use of demountables is appropriate at the margins to deal with some capacity issues, but they should not be a substitute for wholistic forward planning to deal with and manage demand for

⁵ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6017301/the-canberra-schools-bursting-at-seams-and-those-less-than-half-full/> accessed 8 April 2021.

⁶ https://apps.treasury.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1305581/ACT-Population-Projections-Paper-FINAL.pdf accessed 12 April 2021.

⁷ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6120943/what-canberras-inner-north-needs-to-cope-with-growth/> accessed on 6 April 2021.



public education across the region. This includes consideration of construction of additional schools or properly planned expansion of existing schools.

Pressure on non-classroom infrastructure

Increased enrolments also put pressure on non-classroom facilities like bathrooms, the school hall and playground space. It also puts pressure on timetabling⁸ trying to ensure all students have equitable access to specialist programs.

According to the Census of ACT Schools in 2018, capacity at Majura Primary was 756. However, in 2020 capacity was listed as 806. It is not clear to the parent community how capacity at Majura Primary increased by 50 students between 2018 and 2020 when no additional space was added to the school. Raw capacity numbers can be misleading because they don't account for differences in teacher ratios across primary school years nor are enrolments across year groups even. So, if there is a year group with 100 students and a ratio of 1:30 there will be 4 classes of 25 students. This means that 5 capacity places per class or 20 overall from the cohort are unusable. In this way using capacity numbers to plan for infrastructure is inaccurate.

Interestingly, in 2018 it was reported that there are guidelines for the number of students per classroom for new school builds but no rules for existing buildings.⁹ The same article noted that existing buildings were guided by student/teacher ratios. However, it is not clear why a set ratio of children per meter squared cannot be applied equitably across new and existing classrooms. It is not appropriate for school capacity to be increased by simply squeezing more children into aging classrooms. Nor is it appropriate schools built in newer suburbs operate under different standards than those in existing suburbs at older schools.

Majura Primary can barely fit all students in the school hall for assemblies. This can make it difficult for parents to attend assemblies and engage in our school community due to lack of space for additional attendees. There is no space for teachers to use as breakout areas either to collaborate with other teachers or to support their teaching practice. While the school hasn't yet reported that access to bathroom facilities is a problem at Majura Primary, continued growth enrolments is likely to put pressure on these facilities – which supported less than 600 students in 2015 and are now catering for over 800.

Installation of demountables on school grounds reduces the availability of playground space for children to play on. The government may need to consider increasing school capacity by installing multi-level buildings as a way to minimise loss of outdoor play spaces.

The increased capacity created by demountables increases traffic around the school. Traffic management around Majura Primary is a significant concern for both the school and parent community. The local roads are not designed to cope with a school of 800 students and traffic at peak periods around at before and after school pick-up is dangerous. Further expansions of existing schools need to consider issues such as traffic and playground space in order to ensure that expansions are safe and manageable.

⁸ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/act/what-it-s-like-at-canberra-s-most-packed-public-school-20180523-p4zh0m.html> accessed 8 April 2021.

⁹ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/act/what-it-s-like-at-canberra-s-most-packed-public-school-20180523-p4zh0m.html> accessed 8 April 2021.



Upgrading aged school infrastructure to provide modern learning spaces

Majura Primary School was built in 1963¹⁰ and the school is showing its age. 86.21% of parents we surveyed rated concern with aging school infrastructure as 'very important' or 'important'.

Not every classroom in the school has air conditioning installed. In 2020, the Majura P&C provided funding to the school to support the installation of air-conditioning in 8 classes but some classes are still without air-conditioning. Given the Canberra summer heat every classroom should have air-conditioning to facilitate student learning. This became a real health hazard during the 2020 bushfires when smoke haze blanketed the whole community.

With the changing climate parents would welcome investment into aging schools to enhance sustainability and future proof learning facilities. This includes installation of double glazing and solar power. School improvements could include a focus on the removal of hazardous material on site in order to ensure safety of students and teachers now and into the future.

Playground equipment installed in older schools reflects the thinking of the time that it was installed and is not necessarily in line with modern approaches or safety standards. Playground and outdoor spaces at older schools require renewal to ensure that they support gross motor skill development and children's play. This includes sporting facilities, natural play opportunities as well as climbing equipment.

Recent upgrades to outdoor spaces at Majura Primary have focused on the installation of a naturoscapes outdoor play area that harvests rain and supports open ended play. However, this project was largely driven by the P&C through fundraising. Now that it is established future development of the naturoscapes are funded 50/50 by the school and the P&C. The access to modern and updated play equipment within an ACT public school should not be dependent on the ability of the P&C to raise funds to drive the investment. There is a level of disquiet among our school community that the P&C is raising funds to provide facilities that are viewed as a Directorate responsibility.

The Education Directorate should ensure that older public schools in Canberra have access to the same high-quality learning and play space as schools constructed in newer suburbs. Failure to do so increases inequity across the network with parents in older suburbs funding (through our taxes) the provision of modern school facilities in newer schools while our local school languishes.

Community access

In older suburbs there is a severe lack of updated public play equipment for community use. Many playgrounds in and around the older part of Watson are old fashioned and, in some cases, dangerous. One local playground has a metal slide that catches the full western sun and gets too hot to be used on a summer afternoon. Recent investment in community playgrounds did little to improve either their quality or safety. In one instance the upgrade involved repainting the old equipment, fencing two sides of the park and providing a concrete path that didn't connect to other paths.

As a consequence, families with young children rely on after-hours access to local public schools to play on playground equipment. Majura Primary recently had a fence installed around a portion of the playground and it has caused a great degree of concern among some people within the school community. There is a recognition among the school community that fences are required to ensure

¹⁰ <http://www.majuraps.act.edu.au/> accessed 6 April 2021.



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safety of some children but the installation of fences around public schools should balance needs for student safety within school hours with community access after-hours.

The type of fence mandated by the Directorate is incredibly divisive within the community – with many parents unsupportive of the use of 8ft black spiked fences within an education setting. These fences are designed to keep vandals out not children in. Community opposition to fences more broadly would likely be reduced if there was scope for installation of lower 1.5 to 1.8m high fences that still allow for student safety without looking so visually dominant.

Thank you for your consideration of our submission.

Dan Rowley
Convenor
Majura P&C

Penny Edwards
Chair
Majura P&C Preschool Subcommittee

