



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

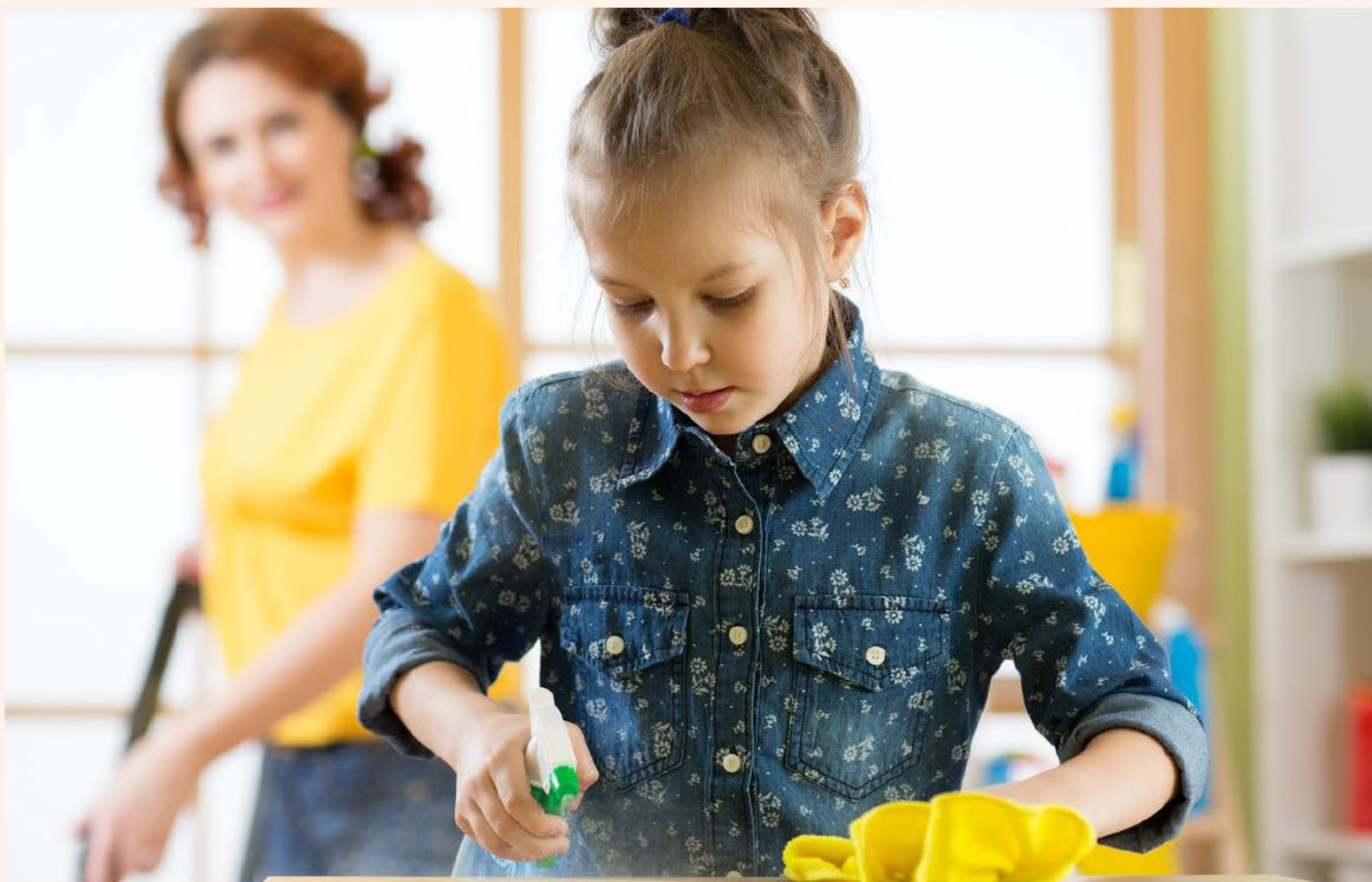
STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA (Chair), Mr Jonathan Davis MLA (Deputy Chair),
Mr Peter Cain MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure

Submission Number: 5

Date Authorised for Publication: 4 May 2021



INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF ACT SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE

Carers ACT submission April 2021

About Carers ACT

Carers ACT is the leading body for carers in the ACT. We work to ensure that carers enjoy improved outcomes in health, wellbeing, resilience and financial security. We also work to ensure that caring is acknowledged and recognised as a shared responsibility of family, community and government.

Our purpose is to support, connect and empower carers to maintain their caring role and personal wellbeing.

The Carer Recognition Act 2010 defines carers as people who provide personal care, support and assistance to people with disability, medical condition (including terminal or chronic illness), mental illness or frail age. Carers include family members, friends, relatives, siblings or neighbours.

In the ACT nearly 50,000 people provide care. Carers provide an important role in the family and in the broader community, supporting the quality of life of the person they care for. A carer's role can include help with daily living activities such as housework, transport, health care, shopping and meals, reading and writing, emotional and mental support and personal care.

According to the ABS one in ten children and young people provide informal care in families with disability, mental health or chronic health conditions or to people who are frail aged or requiring palliative care. Young carers can be as young as 4 years old and can be the sole carer in the family.

For information contact:

Ms Lisa Kelly

Chief Executive Officer Carers ACT

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Website: www.carersact.org.au

Context

Carers ACT represents family and friend carers in the ACT. Carers cut across the community and can be any age and gender, from across all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, live in many forms of family and provide assistance with the tasks of daily living to parents, children, partners, siblings, relatives or friends. Carers ACT currently supports carers from age 4 to 94 years of age.

In the context of schools, decisions on infrastructure have impact on children and young people who are carers and students as well as on adult carers of children who are students and living with disability, a mental health or sensory condition.

In 2018 17.7% of the population are recorded as having a disability¹.

Of those aged 5-14 years 10% live with a diagnosed disability.

In 2018, among school aged children (5 to 14 years) with disability, almost all (95.8% or 285,500) attended school¹.

In 2018, 1.7% of the population had autism which can manifest in sensory issues¹.

Research suggests that around 75% of mental health issues emerge before the age of 25, making youth mental health a significant area of concern for parents, carers and schools in the ACT².

1 in 5 Australian will experience mental illness in a given year, making it highly likely that there are parents or guardians at all ACT schools with lived experience of mental illness³.

Response to the inquiry

Carers ACT would like to draw attention to the fact that many students are young carers. For these students their role as a carer is integral to their life and including their parent or family member with a disability in their educational experiences can be extremely important. When schools are accessible, parents (or family members) who have a disability are implicitly welcome and included, there is less stigma for those students, and they are able to enjoy the full involvement of their parents who can more easily attend the school.

For those parents and guardians whose children have mental health or sensory conditions, the school environment again is critical, and we support designing educational infrastructure with this as a consideration. Children who have sensitivities and vulnerabilities relating to environment and infrastructure can manifest challenging behaviours and even school refusal. The impact on parent carers can include being called in to manage behaviours, respond to distress and provide motivation for their children to attend school. This can impact on the carer's work, health and wellbeing.

Designing Schools for Everyone

The ACT Government is supporting the introduction of mandatory accessibility standards in the National Construction Code recognising the importance of accessibility design in housing for people with disabilities. This is something we applaud. Carers ACT recommends that the ACT Government takes the same

philosophical approach to schools to make sure they are welcoming and accessible environments for students, teachers, parents and carers, and the wider school community.

Parents and carers of school aged children often have cause to visit the school their child attends for a myriad of reasons. These can include pick-up and drop-off, for voluntary work, for parent-teacher interviews and for attending school functions. Statistically we know that up to 20% of these parents and carers will have a disability resulting in many of the students having a concurrent role as a carer. We think it is vital that the families of young carers are considered in school design and that schools are accessible and supportive of the involvement of all family members as we know this benefits children, young people and most importantly young carers.⁵

Providing the right environment for self-regulation can have a positive impact on carers. It can mean that carers are not called upon attend school at short notice to deescalate behaviour or asked to withdraw their distressed children from school. This means carers are less likely to be required to be 'on stand-by' for difficult situations and can engage in everyday activities and make and keep commitments including to their work. A comfortable, sensory appropriate room whereby students can re-calibrate their responses is valuable for their schooling and is valuable for their carers. The right school environment for self-regulation can reduce work absenteeism of carers and school absenteeism of students.

The South Australian Department of Education has put significant work into a resource on universal design in schools, incorporating both physical accessibility and design to promote emotional self-regulation⁶. We suggest that the ACT Education Directorate consider developing a similar resource and surrounding policy framework for ACT Schools.

Designing Schools for Good Mental Health

Carers ACT would like to see the concept of accessibility expanded from ramps and stairs to include the impact of the school environment on mental health.

School environments can have an enormous impact on mental wellbeing. Harsh lighting, poor acoustics, poorly chosen colour schemes and decoration can contribute to emotional dysregulation and sensory overload for students with mental ill health or sensory processing issues. To support students to take a break when they need to and learn to regulate their emotions, sensory rooms should be incorporated into standard school design. Both South Australia⁷ and Victoria⁸ provide an example for how a sensory space policy could look. School could also consider how they incorporate green spaces into their grounds as these can also act as sensory spaces, and generally promote good cognitive development⁹. As much as possible, mainstream classrooms should also be designed to provide a comfortable, calming learning environment for all students, so that sensory spaces don't become overused and lead to the isolation of students with disability or mental ill health.

For parents and carers visiting schools for parent-teacher interviews, volunteering and other events, poorly designed buildings with harsh lighting, poor acoustics and utilitarian furniture can make spaces unwelcoming and impact on their ability to participate in the school community. Schools should consider how they can best design buildings and set up classrooms to make the space inviting and safe. This will support parents with

trauma, mental ill health or sensory issues to be more at ease on the school premises and therefore more able to engage with the school community thus producing better outcomes for themselves and their children.

Spaces for Community 'In-Reach'

Community mental health organisations are regularly called on by schools to support student mental health. Often, this involves referring a student out of the school into an unfamiliar environment, rather than providing space for services to meet them where they are. It would be beneficial for schools to have a dedicated space for community organisation to do 'in-reach' to improve student access to specialised services. For example, a community service could send a counsellor from their own mental health program to assess students the school psychologist has identified for entry into their program, or a parents support group could set up for a morning so parents can come and ask questions about the services they offer.

Having spaces for community programs to run as well as for appointments to be conducted can also impact significantly on carers time and wellbeing. Collecting children from school to attend appointments elsewhere is not only disruptive for students but impacts on carers use of time, particularly time away from their work.

Recommendations

Carers ACT recommends:

1. That all new ACT School infrastructure adhere to universal design principles¹⁰ to ensure the accessibility for students, teachers, parents and carers with disabilities.
2. That all ACT Schools prioritise the inclusion of sensory spaces to support emotional regulation in students with disabilities and mental ill health.
3. That all school infrastructure design take into account mental health and sensory processing when designing classrooms and spaces in schools, and that the ACT Education Directorate develop guidelines to support designing for mental wellbeing.
4. That all ACT Schools incorporate green space into their design to support the mental health, development and wellbeing of students, carers, staff and community members.
5. That ACT Schools create appropriate spaces for community organisations to do 'in-reach' to support students, parents and carers.

References

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia Summary of Findings*. 2018. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#children-with-disability>
2. Black Dog Institute. *Youth Mental Health*. [<https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/research-areas/youth-mental-health/>] Retrieved April 23, 2021.

3. Australian Bureau of Statistics. *National Health Survey Findings: Mental Health*. 2018. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/health-conditions-and-risks/mental-health/latest-release>
4. Oostdam, R., & Hooge, E. (2013). Making the difference with active parenting; forming educational partnerships between parents and schools. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 28(2), 337-351. Retrieved April 22, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23421898>
5. Desforges C and Abouchaar A, The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review. (2003) https://www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/impact_of_parental_involvement/the_impact_of_parental_involvement.pdf
6. Department for Education, Government of South Australia. *Designing buildings and spaces for everyone* [<https://www.education.sa.gov.au/working-us/builders-design-and-maintenance/designing-buildings-and-spaces-everyone>]. Retrieved April 23, 2021.
7. Department for Education, Government of South Australia. *Designing calming or stimulating sensory learning spaces* [<https://www.education.sa.gov.au/working-us/builders-design-and-maintenance/designing-buildings-and-spaces-everyone/designing-calming-or-stimulating-sensory-learning-spaces>] Retrieved April 23, 2021.
8. Department of Education, Government of Victoria. *Policy and Advisory Library: Sensory Rooms* [<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/sensory-rooms/policy>] Retrieved April 23, 2021.
9. Payam Dadvand et al., "Green Spaces and Cognitive Development in Primary Schoolchildren," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 26 (June 30, 2015): 7937–7942, accessed April 23, 2021, <https://www.pnas.org/content/112/26/7937>.
10. Centre for Universal Design Australia. *7 Principles of Universal Design*. [<https://universaldesignaustralia.net.au/7-principles-of-universal-design/>] Retrieved April 23, 2021.

CarersACT



www.carersact.org.au