



Inquiry into Appropriation Bill 2026–2027 and Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2026–2027

Answer to question taken on notice

Asked by: Ms Lee

Addressed to: Mr Patrick Judge, Branch Secretary of the AEU, ACT Branch

In relation to: Classes without teachers by school level

Hearing: 03 July 2026

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Answer Due: 13 July 2026

Mr Patrick Judge took on notice the following question(s):

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Mr Judge: I think firstly, we are not talking about hiring more teachers to lighten the load; we are talking about having enough teachers to cover the classes, to be really clear. So that sort of basic level. In terms of—I think the heart of this question is, is there a workforce out there? Well, we hear the schools are fully staffed from the government.

We hear from people, our members who are early in their careers that they know people who are registered teachers who are looking for work and not getting it in ACT government schools, and we hear from our principal members that they simply do not have the money in their budget or the approvals to hire additional staff to cover some of these gaps, or that they do not have a sufficient relief budget to hire relief teachers. So, the question to us would appear to be more about whether the funding actually exists to hire a sufficient number of teachers than whether the teachers are available. Having said that, it is very clear that there has been a shortage of teachers nationally,

and governments all around the country have been taking steps to address that, including the ACT government.

The question, though, I think really goes to if a school today that does not have enough staff was looking to hire someone to cover the gap—well, we think that there are examples where the school would not be allowed to hire people within its budget to cover those classes that students are missing out on.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: That comes back to the budget. Sort of the SRS funding model, the other follow-on question from that, I am interested in from the other side of users is, is the—the reading that I have been doing suggests that it is only sort of—the only fully funded to the SRS sort of public schools in the national public education system are in the ACT, but still remains—funding is still an issue. So is that contested that the ACT public school system is fully funded according to the SRS?

Mr Judge: No, we would not contest that the ACT's funded according to the SRS, but I thought—

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Like fully funded, no.

Mr Judge: Yes, the question that our members, and I think anyone who is involved in the public school would ask, though is, is it meaningful to say that schools are fully funded to the SRS if there is not a teacher to cover a class, and we would say no, that is not meaningful to say. Unless there are sufficient staff to actually do the job of schools, it is not good to say we are fully funded to the SRS.

THE CHAIR: Just a supplementary on that. So fully funded to the SRS, where is the discrepancy? If the SRS's—and pardon my ignorance of the standard—well, then, there is no teacher in a class. Like, where is the disconnect?

Mr Judge: I am not sure that we could answer that question. I just do not think we have the information to know why that is.

MS LEE: Can I just follow on from that as well, chair?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

MS LEE: I mean, it is extraordinary that, you know, your members' experiences are that we have got schools in the ACT that do not even have enough funding to actually have a teacher in the classroom. I mean, that is extraordinary. In terms of—how many schools are we talking? Do you have—I mean, I know that you might not have an exact, but in terms of the feedback that you get, are we talking majority of schools; are we talking a handful?

Mr Judge: We would have to take that on notice.

THE CHAIR: Is that your—

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: I will come back to—

THE CHAIR: Ms Lee.

MS LEE: Thank you. Just on that topic, if I can ask a question and sort of clarify it as another supplementary, just while you are taking that on notice, if you can also—if it is available to you—sort of, you know, in terms of primary school, high school, college, yes, if that is possible, thank you.

Australian Education Union ACT Branch: The answer to the Member's question is as follows:

There are three circumstances where our school-based members report being unable to fill positions:

1. Specific vacancies that are difficult to fill (for example, due to specialised skills being required)
2. Budgetary constraints that prevent filling, replacing or backfilling staff;
3. Insufficient relief budgets based on 2019 leave utilisation rates.

Our answer goes to the second and third of these issues specifically.

At present, the most pervasive problem our members report is that schools are running over budget and are therefore constrained from filling, replacing or backfilling the staff their students need. A school that is over budget is, in practical terms, a school that no longer has approval to hire, even where the need is acute and the position is vacant.

The AEU conducted a school resourcing survey between 20 August and 22 September 2025. The survey received responses from 36 schools. Of the schools that responded, a clear majority (27/36) reported being over budget. 34 of 36 schools (94%) reported their current level of resourcing as inadequate or greatly inadequate. 23 schools (64%) told us they did not have the resourcing to meet

their obligations under the relevant Enterprise Agreements, and the same majority (64%) said they did not have the resources needed to protect staff and student health and safety so far as is reasonably practicable.

In free text answers to that survey, schools reported understaffing including:

- When a School Leader C won a new position and left the school, the role was covered internally through an acting higher duties arrangement, but no teacher was employed to backfill the person stepping up. This resulted in near-daily split or combined classes. A known, available part-time teacher was not asked to work in order to stay within budget.
- Two kindergarten classes were established at numbers above the class size limit of 21 due to late in-area enrolments. Rather than hiring another teacher to ensure the classes stayed within the cap, the teachers were promised a full-time learning support assistant each, but those LSAs were repeatedly redeployed to cover absences in other parts of the school. In most cases, one LSA had to split their time across both rooms.
- A school reported that it has stopped engaging casual teachers entirely because it is over budget, leading to more split classes and (in the words of the respondent) an increased risk of unsafe student behaviour.

In some cases, the impacts are even more acute. One survey respondent advised that a teacher at their school was on six weeks' personal leave from a Year 1 class of 20 students. During the first week the class was mostly held together by the school's single full-time casual. During the second week, the class was split across other rooms for four of five days, because no casual or permit-to-teach staff were available to provide cover.

It is not only the AEU's members who are aware of the chronic understaffing of our schools. According to an ACT Parents survey conducted in December 2025, 26.7% of respondents experienced split or collapsed classes (ie. where the regular teacher was away and no replacement was available). 20.5% reported classes being supervised rather than taught. 9.8% reported unfilled teacher vacancies at their school.

In practice, these circumstances have led to constant erosion of our members' working conditions and the support to our students: casual relief teachers are no longer engaged because the school cannot afford them; learning support assistants are redeployed or cut and students with additional needs go without support; and classes are routinely split or combined when a staff member is absent and there is no funded cover.

Our schools also report difficulty in hiring required staff even when they clearly have the budget to engage them. One school leader reported to the AEU that, in term 3 2025 they sought approval to hire a learning support assistant. They needed this LSA for the beginning of the 2026 school year, to replace an experience LSA who was leaving. By week 6 of term 4, the school was still awaiting approval to undertake recruitment activity. In the final weeks of term, the school was advised that no appropriate school assistant was available from the central pool and their recruitment activity was approved, but without sufficient time to complete that recruitment before the beginning of the 2026 school year. While they had sufficient budget to hire someone, completing the process to do so would have required the school leadership to agree to forego their annual leave.

Finally, the Education Directorate has repeatedly confirmed to the AEU that its budgets for casual staff are based on utilisation from 2019, and that leave utilisation rates have grown. The AEU questions why the Directorate continues to resource schools based on utilisation that it knows is inaccurate rather than simply adjusting based on the pattern of leave utilisation in recent years.

These are not new problems. In response to the AEU's enterprise bargaining survey, conducted in February 2025, a concerning number of respondents reported "having to take on extra students in class due to staff absences" "regularly **at least once a week**" including:

- 52% of primary school teachers
- 28% of high school teachers
- 6% of college teachers

Amongst school leaders, who should be focusing on educational leadership rather than backfilling classes, the numbers were:

- 43% of primary School Leaders C (SLCs)
- 28% of high school SLCs
- 41% of P-10 SLCs
- 33.3% of special school SLCs

I note that the Education Directorate's own reporting shows the system staffed above the 13.3-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio, and claims vacancies at record lows. These are system-level aggregates, measured against an enrolment formula. They do not measure whether an individual school has the funded capacity to staff to the actual needs of its students, and it is at that school level that the budget pressure is biting.

Approved for circulation to the Select Committee on Estimates

Signature:

By the Branch Secretary, AEU ACT Branch



Patrick Judge

Date: 13 July 2026

