



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure

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Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
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Submission to the inquiry by the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion into the management of infrastructure in ACT schools

I am the parent of two children at Majura Primary School in Watson in Canberra's inner north. I have been an active member of the school community at Majura for five years.

Aging infrastructure and the costs of maintenance and repairs – who is paying?

The ACT Audit Auditor General published a report in 2019 on the Maintenance of ACT School Infrastructure. A starting point for the Committee should logically be to see what the Education Directorate has done to address and rectify the issues identified in 2019. For example, are schools across the ACT still using other components of the School Operational Allocation, beyond their budget for repairs and maintenance, to pay for activities? Are repairs and maintenance activities and school infrastructure funded through other sources of revenue, outside of the schools funding?

Majura Primary School was built in 1963 and the school is showing its age. Not every classroom in the school has air conditioning installed. In 2020, the Majura Parents and Citizens Committee (P&C) provided funding to the school to support the installation of air-conditioning in eight classes but some classes are still without air-conditioning. Given Canberra summer average temperatures every classroom in all public schools should have air-conditioning. This became a real health hazard during the 2020 bushfires when smoke haze blanketed the whole community. From media reports this was a common experience in other public schools.

Maintenance and repair costs increase as schools age – this should be recognised and resources provided to fund school budgets to reflect this reality. Schools and P&Cs using their own limited resources to fund aging infrastructure means students miss out on other opportunities and creates a divide between public, private and newly built public schools. When you consider the facilities and infrastructure available at private schools and the schools in newly developed suburbs, the ACT Government is not doing enough to level the playing field between school infrastructure in older and newer suburbs.¹

What management of capacity in schools across the inner north?

The ACT government has sold a number of former primary and high school sites in the inner north as well as approving a huge number of land sales in the inner north for medium density housing. There should be no surprise to the ACT Government that there was going to be a flow on effect for school capacity issues. This has been on the radar, at least for parents, for nearly a decade. While this inquiry is welcomed, it feels a little too late. There has been ample opportunity for the ACT Government to have made forward plans for schools capacity at each step of the way of their urban infill agenda.

¹ ABC News, I Ting, A Palmer, N Scott, *Rich school, poor school: Australia's great education divide*, 6 September 2019 – available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-13/rich-school-poor-school-australias-great-education-divide/11383384?nw=0>

Despite the indicators and requests from schools, the Education Directorate has only taken reactive measures once capacity issues are out of hand, such as the installation of demountables (Majura, North Ainslie et al). The use of demountables are a short term solution and impact on the students' learning in the present, as the demountables, at least at Majura, were not built in time. Their footprint, also means they take away students play areas.

Similarly, as the Education Directorate has no apparent forward plan for ongoing capacity issues at a number of inner north schools, each and every year, schools have to advocate to retain specialist teaching spaces, such as the library or music room. Again this adds to inequity between public and private with private schools having auditoriums, concert halls, music centres, and numerous music tuition rooms yet public schools are having to fight tooth and nail to keep one music room and have to hold assemblies in a hall which doesn't fit the students, let alone both students and parents.²

Even with independent reporting, and clear evidence of increased enrolments across the inner north there have been no announcements from the Education Directorate of any holistic plans for dealing with forecast increased populations across the inner north of Canberra. Parents and their children are growing anxious about which high school they will attend given the clear pressures on the existing feeder schools (Campbell High School and Lyneham High School).

I endorse the comments of the Majura P&C submission in terms of changes to the method for calculating school infrastructure capacity assessments:

1. Specialist teaching spaces. That the infrastructure capacity assessment process allows for specialist teaching space. Specifically, where classrooms contain special equipment or configurations, that these classrooms be excluded from 'normal' classroom capacity calculations. Update the current policy to permanently exclude purpose-built specialist spaces from school capacity calculations.

2. Maximum class sizes to be adjusted to meet Directorate policy, rather than working from an average of 25 students per classroom. Directorate policy is for a maximum of 21 children per classroom in K – 2 and maximum of 30 in years 3-6. A simple average between this maximum class size and that of the older year levels does not adequately recognise that a significant portion of the school cannot support 25 children per class.

Are schools meeting the requirements under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*?

While I am not a parent of a child with a disability the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* outlines that is unlawful for an educational authority (i.e. schools) to discriminate against a person on the ground of the person's disability. This includes having appropriate access and curricula which would not exclude a person from participation based on their disability. The Committee may wish to seek confirmation from the Education Directorate that all Canberra public and private schools, whether older or newer meet their legal obligations. If the Directorate cannot provide such confirmation the question should be asked why not?

The system has failed us all by reaching this point. Our children deserve much better than this. ACT taxpayers deserve better than this. I hope that this inquiry will provide both answers and timely action to address matters raised.

² Riot Act, L Roberts, *Terry Snow donates record-breaking \$20 million to Canberra Grammar*, 15 October 2019 – available at: <https://the-riotact.com/terry-snow-donates-record-breaking-20-million-to-canberra-grammar/330769>

