



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA (Chair), Mr Jonathan Davis MLA (Deputy
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the Future of School Infrastructure in the ACT

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ACT Legislative Assembly Standing
Committee on Education and
Community Inclusion:
The Future of ACT School
Infrastructure

Submission by

The Association of Independent Schools of the ACT
(AISACT)

March 2023

Introduction

The Association of Independent Schools of the ACT (AISACT) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion around their inquiry into the future of school infrastructure in the ACT.

The ACT independent school sector provides a diverse range of schooling options to families living in the ACT and in the surrounding region, and to families needing boarding school facilities.

Independent schools play an important role in providing educational alternatives to those provided by the government sector. The ACT community is multicultural and diverse, and the independent school sector reflects this. It should be a basic premise that parents should have a choice, where possible, about where their child is educated. There are many reasons underpinning parental choice, including pedagogical style, learning environment, faith, values, gender, school culture and pastoral structures.

Independent schools have emerged in direct response to community demand and have a long history of accepting an educational leadership role in the national capital, and a shared role with governments, in setting up schools in the ACT.

In the end, it is about parents finding a school which provides the best 'fit' and, therefore, the best opportunities for success for their child.

The Association represents all eighteen independent schools which together educate around 15,392 students, or around 19% of the ACT school population (29% of ACT high school students attend independent schools). Enrolment in Canberra's Independent schools has historically been very strong and have seen a 21% increase in student enrolment over the past 10 years.

Independent schools in the ACT have a wide range of student populations, with the smallest school having 57 students and the largest over 2250 students.

Our schools are very committed to ensuring that they provide safe and supportive environments which protects and empowers children and young people to achieve their potential.

Submission

The Association of Independent Schools ACT (AISACT) acknowledges that the Committee is inquiring into the future of ACT school infrastructure, with particular information sought on:

- a) Access to safe and healthy schools, including distance (travel to school);
- b) Age-appropriate learning and recreation spaces;
- c) Consideration of the external environment, including climate awareness;
- d) The learning interactions between teachers, spaces and pedagogy, including scheduling/timetabling of access to spaces;
- e) Cross-cultural impact;
- f) Context for students from varying income backgrounds (class analysis); use of technology; optimal school size;
- g) Synergies with the wider community; and
- h) Long-term planning and demographic change.

AISACT has limited its comments and feedback to the elements outlined above that could reasonably be applicable to Member schools both now and into the future.

It must be emphasised that all ACT Independent schools have developed masterplans by which they plan, monitor, and develop infrastructure to best suit the needs of their students, teachers, and community. Masterplans naturally evolve and change over time to accommodate the varying parameters of school population size, as well as other environmental, climatic and technological influences in addressing their future infrastructure needs. Parents and the school community are consulted in these processes.

a) Access to safe and healthy schools, including distance (travel to school)

There are 18 Independent schools across the ACT. The majority of Member schools are co-educational, three (3) are single sex, and two (2) provide boarding facilities. Independent schools by their nature attract students from across the ACT, and from neighbouring NSW. Student travel to and from school is an important and ongoing factor in school planning. Individual schools have a range of strategies to support students and families in accessing a school.

b) Age-appropriate learning and recreation spaces

c) Consideration of the external environment, including climate awareness

d) The learning interactions between teachers, spaces and pedagogy, including scheduling/timetabling of access to spaces.

Independent schools evolve over time and in doing so, in conjunction with evolving masterplans (as outlined above), infrastructure development reflects responsiveness to requirements, new building initiatives, advances in designs complementary to pedagogical approaches, developing impacts of health initiatives, and moving with advances in technology and sustainability.

ACT Member schools employ almost 21% of all teachers in the ACT, and teachers are well served by the infrastructure of a school, with each school developing over time its own arrangement and buildings to best meet the needs of the students and staff in terms of learning spaces both inside and outside. The emphasis is always dependent on the individual school focus and philosophy and the needs of the curriculum and extra curricula activities.

Capital funding to enhance learning programs and develop new learning spaces is sourced through borrowing, fund raising, levies on parents, school reserves, and (on rare occasions) through gifts.

In addition, the Australian Government provides Capital Grants (through an application process) to ACT non-government schools (total number, 47) of around \$4 million per annum. Each school needs to contribute *at least* 30% of the total build cost of projects funding is requested for.

The ACT Government's "Better Schools for Kids" Grants contributes approximately \$3.8 million each year to non – government schools, again through an application process.

Both Commonwealth and ACT grants are administered through the ACT Bloc Grant Authority, with priority given to disadvantaged school communities with the least capacity to raise funds to support the development of their school infrastructure.

e) Cross-cultural impact

ACT Member schools provide a diverse range of schooling options to families. As has been noted in the introduction, Independent schools play an important role in providing educational alternatives. The ACT community is diverse, and the independent school sector reflects this.

It should be a basic premise that parents should have a choice, if possible, about where their child is educated. There are many reasons which will underpin parental choice, including pedagogical style, learning environment, faith, values, gender, school culture and pastoral structures.

f) Context for students from varying income backgrounds (class analysis); use of technology

Most of the income of Independent schools in the ACT comes from families, which means the cost of education is shared. Governments save an estimated \$213 million in school funding due to the contribution of families who chose to send their children to ACT Independent schools. The median annual school fee in the ACT independent sector is \$8,601.

The funding model for schools, the Schooling Resourcing Standard (SRS), comprises base funding plus loadings to address educational disadvantage. Base funding for member schools is adjusted according to the school community's estimated capacity to contribute (CTC) to the costs of education, assessed on parental income tax data. This methodology

is known as the Direct Measure of Income (DMI). Schools with a higher CTC score receive less per capita base funding.

g) Optimal school size

Growth in the independent school sector continues, with enrolments in 2021 growing by 2.1%. Growth in the sector, and in individual schools, is dictated by the capacity of schools to increase enrolments. AISACT does not propose that there is an optimal school size, as schools reflect and respond to community demand.

h) Synergies with the wider community

Member schools are primarily accountable to their parent and school community. The sector presents a diverse range of religious and/or philosophical affiliations, and a range of approaches to teaching and learning. Whichever the school, independent schools do not begin, nor continue to exist, without the support of their communities and the families which select them for the education of their children.

i) Long-term planning and demographic change

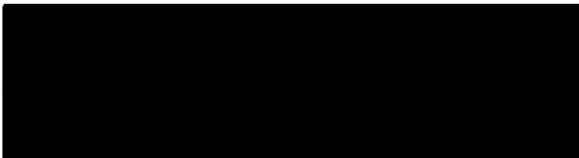
The non-government school sector is no longer well served or recognised in planning to provide new schools, enabling parental choice in the newly planned and developed greenfield areas.

The non-government school sectors now must compete against each other through a long and protracted process to acquire land to build a school. There is no visibility for existing or new providers to be able to identify, or be aware of, possible new greenfield sights for schools to expand to, or new providers to consider. School Boards need information several years in advance of any predicted opening date so that they might even consider an opportunity. Even after gaining a parcel of land, an In Principle Approval to open a school requires not less than two (2) years lead time before classes can commence.


The recent process for a site in the Molonglo Valley is an example of these difficulties. The non-government sectors were pitted against each other for a single parcel of land, when demographic data would suggest that both sectors would have had support for schools. These processes are indicative of the opaqueness and extreme amount of red tape through which non-government schools must navigate.

Conclusion

AISACT appreciated the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion and would be happy to further discuss any matters outlined in this submission.



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 March 2023