



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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Foreword

Latham Primary School Parents and Citizens Association (P & C) would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission. The submission will respond directly to the terms of reference of the inquiry, and make recommendations to improve the current approach to school infrastructure management in the Australian Capital Territory.

Latham Primary School

Built in 1972, Latham Primary School is a beautiful little school in the Belconnen area, designed by the late Enrico Taglietti, the famed architect and winner of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Gold Medal for Architecture. We have strong ties with our community and a long history of volunteer support. At Latham Primary our motto is 'Living to Learn', and our vision is that we support global citizens to belong, embrace learning and enjoy a quality education. We believe that all students and adults have the ability to be lifelong learners. We aim to provide students with an engaging and relevant curriculum where the learning process is just as important as the content. Learning how to learn and developing critical thinking skills in today's rapidly changing society is a focus for Latham.

Latham Primary School is committed to the development of the whole individual. The emphasis in our preschool and primary programs is to ensure that the students develop a strong sense of morality, integrity and care towards others. Everyone in our school community honours and practises our shared values of Respect, Motivation, Collaboration, Resilience and Positivity. Students are encouraged to celebrate diversity, discover new interests, form new friendships and develop a style of leadership centred on service. The extensive curricular and co-curricular program provides students with a balanced development of the intellectual, emotional and physical elements of life. This enables our students to reach their potential both as a learner and as a member of the community.

In 2021, Latham Primary is educating approximately 390 students, including preschool students. Of the students at Latham Primary:

- 22% are from families with English as a second language
- 3% are Indigenous
- 12 students are supported by two learning support units
- 25 students receive inclusion support
- 80 students receive learning assistance or mental health/well-being support funded by the school.

About Latham Primary P & C

Latham Primary P & C is a small, volunteer association which is focussed on building relationships within the school community. The importance of this was highlighted during COVID-19. The School Leadership and P&C are jointly working towards a more holistic view of children's needs. Both have recognised that teachers and school leaders need to work in partnership with parents/carers to achieve a shared priority to deliver the best outcomes for their children.

The P&C runs the Latham Lunchbox (school canteen), that provides a wide range of foods and snacks for students and teachers 4 days a week, Tuesday - Friday for lunch and recess. In addition to the school canteen, the P&C offer a breakfast club for students two days a week. The P&C also runs a school uniform shop, providing affordable new uniforms and a second-hand clothing pool.

In the past, the P&C has been primarily focused on fundraising activities. While fundraising still remains an element of P&C focus, during 2021 the aim is to run one at least community-based activity and a small fundraising activity each term. With this shifted focus on building community, it means the P&C has limited funds to contribute to school infrastructure.

Executive Summary

The Latham Primary P & C makes the following comments and recommendations:

- As an older school, Latham Primary has a number of significant infrastructure works that will need to be undertaken over the short, medium and long term so that the school can provide a safe, enriching, and inclusive space for all students, staff, families and community members.
- As a small school, the cost of these infrastructure works is well beyond the financial capacity of Latham Primary, and beyond the means of the school community to address through fundraising.
- Play is central to children's development, and investment in high quality, inclusive play spaces that encourage creativity, risk-taking, resilience, and cooperation will support academic performance and social and emotional learning.
- Critical infrastructure works, such as the replacement of roofs should not be the responsibility of the school community to fund and the school environment should not pose a health and safety risk to students, staff and community members.
- The current approach to funding basic accessible infrastructure - such as wheelchair accessible doors, accessible bathrooms, accessible classrooms and inclusive play spaces – is leading to discriminatory outcomes and denying dignity to disabled students, staff, parents, and carers.
- Latham P & C recommends the Education Directorate take a strategic, forward-thinking approach to mapping, planning and budgeting for school infrastructure maintenance and upgrade needs, taking into account school population projections, the needs of disabled students, staff, parents and carers, current and future technologies to support learning, and opportunities for community use of school spaces.
- Latham P & C recommends the Education Directorate engage in codesign with school and local communities when planning future infrastructure works, to ensure the school environment reflects both the character of the community and the needs of those who will use it.
- Latham P & C recommends the Education Directorate investigate opportunities to utilise school facilities as community centres, to repair community connections impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, to provide rich learning environments, and to harness opportunities to promote greater community cohesion.
- A lack of investment in Latham Primary's infrastructure and facilities over the past 49 years has led to parts of the school being neglected, and a repair bill that insurmountable for the school community to address alone. Latham P & C considers it is unfair to ask the current school community to choose between urgent maintenance and repairs, and meeting the basic needs all students, including access for disabled students, staff and family members.
- Latham P & C requests that an upfront investment is made by the ACT Government to repair Latham Primary's roof, address the issues with heating and cooling, and fund new learning spaces to ensure the school can continue to meet the needs of its students and staff.
- Latham P & C urges the ACT Government to invest in Latham Primary, as a piece of Canberra heritage and a space to support the thriving communities of Latham and West Belconnen.

A) The management of hazardous substances and materials in schools

Built in the 1970s, Latham Primary has a number of hazardous substances and materials on the school grounds, including both asbestos and lead paint. Although both of these substances are generally safe if left undisturbed, they pose significant challenges for the undertaking of urgently needed capital works throughout the school, and limit the school's capacity to upgrade and expand its facilities to meet the needs of the growing suburb of Latham.

Asbestos Pipes

Latham Primary School's oval was developed when the school was built in 1972. At the time of building the school, an extensive network of pipes for watering the oval was installed underground. These pipes are coated in asbestos. The watering system has since fallen into disrepair and is now unusable, however the school has been advised that to dig up the pipes could cost up to \$1 million, due to the need to remove up to one metre of soil to prevent any accidental asbestos exposure. As the pipes cannot be dug up, and the watering system is no longer usable, the oval has fallen into disrepair and suffers significant heat damage each summer, due to lack of watering.

A school oval is a key part of the school community and plays a central role in encouraging play, supporting physical education, and as a meeting place for community groups that hire it on the weekend. The lack of a viable watering system, and the lack of any significant financial support from the Education Directorate for the removal of the asbestos-coated pipes means that this school and community resource is going to waste.

The Latham P & C would like to see a commitment from the Education Directorate to investigate options to either remove the pipes, or install an alternative watering system that will support use of the oval throughout the school year.

Lead Paint

Latham Primary also has lead paint present in its buildings, primarily on old, 1970s heaters that are no longer in use. However, these heaters pose an issue for any planned upgrades to the school, as they present an additional cost that must be factored into budgets. Latham P & C understands the lead paint on these heaters is currently safely contained.

Asbestos Flooring

Latham Primary School has asbestos present in the Community Hub flooring (Refer to B). An initial quote to remove the asbestos flooring was estimated to be \$45,000. The School is currently discussing the removal of it by the Directorate. However no formal decision has been advised yet. Attached to the flooring are old cupboards. It is unknown if the cupboards will be removed along with the floor. If they aren't removed, the Latham P & C will be unable to remove them as it is likely the asbestos flooring runs under the vinyl tiles.

B) planning for the ongoing maintenance of school facilities, including the process to identify and address current and future infrastructure needs in schools

Latham P & C is aware that there are a number of substantial infrastructure needs at Latham Primary that are not currently receiving sufficient funding.

School Roof

The roof at Latham Primary has not been replaced in decades. It leaks badly during any rain, necessitating the use of buckets to protect carpet and other flooring from damage. This poses both a safety risk (the water is travelling through the ceiling where electrical cables run) and a health risk, due to the increased likelihood of mould and mildew growing within the school.

The cost of replacing the school roof will exceed \$1 million, which is well beyond the capacity of the school to fund, and we understand that no commitment has been made by the Education Directorate to do so. The Latham P & C would like to see a commitment from the Directorate to replace the entire roof, instead of funding urgent repairs following each rain event. At present, Latham P & C is not aware of any commitment by the Education Directorate to replace the school roof, despite the health and safety risk it poses to students, parents and staff, and the lack of dignity such ageing infrastructure affords the school community. Latham P & C considers that students should not have to walk around buckets of rainwater to get to class.

Bathroom Maintenance

As an ageing school, Latham has a number of bathrooms that require significant investments and upgrades. Some of the current problems affecting bathrooms include:

- Taps so stiff children are unable to turn them, meaning an adult has to accompany them to the bathroom
- Tree roots blocking pipes and leaving toilets unusable
- Toilet doors that jam shut on adults, leaving them stuck inside toilet cubicles.

The cost of these upgrades, when combined with the other significant upgrades the school requires, are beyond the capacity of the school to fund from its own finances in the short term, and additional support is needed from the Education Directorate to provide students with basic hygiene facilities.

The Hub

Latham Primary is home to a small building that is being rebranded as the 'Latham Community Hub' (the Hub). Latham Primary P & C recently won a \$20,000 grant to undertake a series of works to create a community space in the Hub, however this work is being impacted by a number of issues within the building, including two currently unusable toilets, the presence of asbestos in the flooring, old cupboards that can't be removed (due to flooring), and inadequate heating.

The Canteen

The P&C runs the Latham Lunchbox (school canteen), that provides a wide range of foods and snacks for students and teachers 4 days a week, Tuesday to Friday for lunch and recess. Last year the Latham P & C informally surveyed parents via Facebook about a proposal to provide cheap, nutritious meals every day at lunch for all students. A number of parents expressed interest, and the Latham P & C is continuing to explore opportunities to provide this service, similar to schemes in the United Kingdom and United States. The Latham P & C believes providing a free, cooked meal to all students at a discounted price could help to address nutritional inequalities, and relieve struggling parents of the need to prepare school lunches each day. For families experiencing financial hardship, the Latham P & C would provide free meals.

However in order to deliver this service, the Latham P & C will need financial support to upgrade the canteen. The Latham P & C believes the Education Directorate should explore opportunities to address nutritional inequality in schools through grants or other funding for school canteens to upgrade their facilities to provide hot meals each day.

C) the management of capacity issues in schools, including the use of temporary facilities for schools running above capacity and the plans for schools running below capacity

Latham Primary is currently experiencing capacity pressures. In some instances, this has led to large, combined classes (80 students) operating in a single space. More learning spaces will be required soon to ensure class sizes are kept small enough to support learning and to meet the sensory needs of students. Investment in larger learning spaces now will support continued growth in the school population while providing opportunities for quiet and individual learning.

The community hub is a shared space with the school, P&C and YMCA OSHC service. The building is situated outside of the school grounds which is problematic for a number of reasons. If the school fence line was extended, so the community hub could be within the school boundaries it would mean it could be more readily accessed for students.

D) the adequacy of heating and cooling systems in schools

The current heating and cooling system at Latham Primary is inadequate, leading to large temperature variations across summer and winter. Due to ageing and inadequate insulation in the school, classrooms and staff areas are very cold in the winter (often well below 20 degrees Celsius), and very hot in the summer (well above 30 degrees Celsius). This represents a health and safety hazard for the students and staff at the school, and would be unacceptable in any other professional work environment.

The heating and cooling facilities at the school should be immediately reviewed and upgraded, to provide safe learning and teaching spaces for students and staff. Please see the discussion at *G) the environmental sustainability of school infrastructure and facilities* below, for more detail.

E) the demand for sporting facilities on school grounds and measures to address this demand

Please see discussion above under A, regarding the Latham Primary oval.

F) classroom design

Latham Primary uses a team teaching model, where two classes operate within each learning space. Class sizes differ depending on year level, while the classroom sizes vary across the school. Latham's classrooms suffer from a number of design issues, primarily due to the age of the school and facilities. These include:

- Narrow doorways, with heavy, inward swinging doors
- Inadequate heating and cooling
- Poor thermal sealing around doors and windows
- Limited opportunities for light adjustments
- Non-integrated technology.

Given the pressing need to expand Latham's teaching spaces to meet growing demand, any future classroom design should explicitly incorporate the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), in order to meet the needs of current and future students. Classroom design should consider:

- Culturally respectful and meaningful design elements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff
- Flexible learning spaces to meet the needs of different learners
- Adequate circulation space for mobility device users
- Sufficient heating and cooling to support learning
- Incorporation of technology into the design of the classroom
- Adaptable lighting, to meet the needs of vision impaired teachers and students
- Acoustic damping, to reduce environmental noise and support students and staff with sensory needs
- Incorporation of inclusive, quieter spaces within the main classroom for small group work.

Building more inclusive classrooms will ensure all students and staff will feel supported and welcome in their school communities.

G) the environmental sustainability of school infrastructure and facilities

At present Latham Primary has:

- inadequate and ageing insulation
- Broken and degraded window seals and thin, single glazed windows
- Broken and missing door seals

This leads to significant thermal loss, which increases the cost of heating and cooling for the school. Combined with the leaking roof, the school is not operating sustainably.

Latham Primary P & C would like the ACT Government to commit to investing in addressing the poor thermal envelopes of older schools such as Latham Primary, and providing support to schools to invest in renewable technologies such as solar power systems, to reduce future operating costs. If combined with more modern and efficient heating and cooling systems, the reductions from operating costs could be put towards other upgrades needed across the school to support learning. Early investment now in thermal sealing, efficient heating and cooling, efficient lighting and renewable power will reduce the school's overall cost over the next decade.

H) the adequacy of parking and bike storage facilities

The main Latham Primary car park is too small to meet the needs of the community, with visitors often forced to park at some distance outside the school and walk in. In addition, the small car park near the Community Hub does not have an access ramp into the main school grounds.

A small expansion of the school carpark would mean it could better meet the needs of staff, students and visitors, while the installation of an access ramp in the Hub carpark would make it more accessible to disabled students, parents and staff, and parents with prams.

l) accessibility for students and staff with disabilities

Latham Primary is in urgent need of modifications for students, staff and parents. The school currently has one wheelchair accessible external door and one wheelchair accessible bathroom, to meet the needs of all disabled students, staff and community members.

Front Doors/Front Office Area

There are number of students who use mobility devices at Latham Primary and parents and staff who have mobility issues, however the front doors of the school are currently not wheelchair accessible. They are heavy, outward swinging and too narrow for easy access in a mobility device. The cost of upgrading the front of the school to be accessible (including an upgrade to the front office area) has been estimated at approximately \$500,000, however money put aside by the school for this purpose is no longer available due to a requirement from the Education Directorate that it be spent elsewhere. As a result, only one external door and no internal doors in Latham Primary are wheelchair accessible. Latham Primary P & C considers that disabled students, staff and community members should have the basic dignity of being able to mobilise independently through doorways, without having to ask friends or staff for assistance.

Play Spaces

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the right of every child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities and free and full participation in cultural and artistic life. Play is an integral part of a child's development, and supports physical, social and emotional, cognitive and literacy and numeracy development.¹ For children with disability, who often face social exclusion, play is particularly important to foster development and promote inclusion, recognising that exclusion in the early years often translates into poor social, economic and health outcomes for disabled adults.

At present, none of Latham Primary's play equipment is accessible to, or inclusive of, students with a physical disability. There is also little in the play equipment to meet the sensory needs of the school population. The equipment at the school is inaccessible, exclusionary and is not meeting the needs of Latham Primary students.

Latham Primary P & C considers that the ACT Government should invest in inclusive play spaces in schools, to progress the inclusion of children with disability as outlined in the *National Disability Strategy 2010* and support the growth of meaningful, valued friendships between disabled children and their peers. These play spaces should draw upon principles of UDL and centre the voices of the student population, particularly from marginalised groups.

Community Hub

The Community Hub is located at the top of a flight of concrete stairs from the school grounds. As such, it is not accessible from within the school grounds for wheelchair users, who are forced to travel right around the outside of the school on a public footpath to get to the Hub. The carpark next to the Hub is also lacking a wheelchair ramp, meaning there are no accessible car parks for students who use the YMCA OSHC service. This could be easily addressed by the installation of concrete pathways to nearby school gates, as well as the installation of a wheelchair ramp into the Hub carpark. The Latham Primary P & C considers that this is a reasonable adjustment to make for disabled students, and would also meet the needs of parents and carers with mobility issues, or those who need to push prams through the area.

¹ (Australian Children's Education & Care Authority, 2021)

J) accessibility of school facilities by local communities

A number of small community groups currently use the school's facilities, including Latham P & C. However we note that this access is quite limited, and that for the most part the school sits empty on weekends, and during school holidays. Latham P & C believes that schools should be the centre of their communities, and open to all community members (not just those with family attending the school). If options for opening the school grounds on the weekend were explored, Latham Primary has a fenced playground, which could meet the needs of parents of young children or children who abscond.

Additionally, if the school canteen were upgraded to support the provision of cooked meals for the school community, the canteen and hall could be a valuable space for community groups to use outside school hours. This would help to build connections between the school and the broader community, and also form a valuable income stream for the school, which could be put towards the maintenance, repair and upgrade of facilities.

K) any other relevant matters.

Opportunities to Improve

The current approach to school infrastructure appears reactive, piecemeal and underfunded. This creates an environment where schools have to battle for resources to undertake urgently needed repairs, with no capacity to plan to replace ageing infrastructure before it is crumbling, or invest early to generate savings in the future.

Schools should not be forced to ration resources and choose between providing basic, front door access for disabled students, staff and community members, and undertaking urgent repairs to ensure students have access to hygiene facilities. Instead, schools should be adequately resourced and supported by the ACT Government to meet the needs of their communities, and their obligations to provide equal opportunities and make reasonable adjustments under legislation such as the *Discrimination Act 1991 (ACT)*.

The Latham P & C believes the ACT Government should comprehensively map and then budget and plan for all major school infrastructure repairs, maintenance and upgrades over the next 10 to 15 years. This will ensure schools can continue to meet the needs of students into the future. Any major upgrades to facilities should occur in consultation with school communities through a codesign process, to ensure upgrades and new facilities are appropriate and inclusive.