



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
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Chair), Ms Nicole Lawder MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the Future of School Infrastructure in the ACT

Submission Number: 17

Date Authorised for Publication: 11 April 2023



Australian Government Primary Principals Association

Submission for the

Standing Committee On Education and Community Inclusion

Inquiry Into The Future of School Infrastructure in the ACT

March 2023

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Submission to the Inquiry into the future of school infrastructure in the ACT

Dear Mr Davis

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute this submission to the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion, to support its inquiry into the future of school infrastructure in the ACT.

The Australian Government Primary Principal Association (AGPPA) is the peak body of government school primary principals in Australia, representing over 5 300 primary school leaders across all states and territories. Through the engagement of its National Council, AGPPA pursues the interests of primary educators in Australian Government Schools, and addresses the issues that matter most in primary education.

AGPPA recognises the ACT as a unique jurisdiction, in relation to its size, and the proximity of its schools to education decision makers, locally and in the national context. This inquiry is of particular significance in the year in which ACT education celebrates its 50th anniversary.

AGPPA's commitment to supporting excellence and equity cultivates progressive thinking. Its National Council acknowledges the tradition of transformation that has seen schools across the ACT influence the education landscape, and promote the profession of teaching and school leadership.

We are pleased to contribute perspective in relation to the terms of reference to support this Standing Committee's work in shaping a future of school infrastructure. A commitment to safety and wellbeing of students, staff and communities, and education services that enable active, informed and creative citizens to flourish will serve the task, and Principals well.

Access to Safe and Healthy Schools: Principal wellbeing has captured interest and raised concerns for more than a decade, with an abundance of longitudinal data reflecting a decline. We recognise that the contemporary role of the principal extends beyond accountability for instructional leadership, and involves organisation management, governance, and community establishment. Through our management of school infrastructure, we offer environments in which our schools and communities engage.

Ageing school infrastructure and hazardous materials such as lead paint and asbestos, bring an additional focus and responsibility to the work of principals. Investment in infrastructure, to lift ageing schools to a high standard of safety and functionality, will impact significantly on the principal's experience, and psychological safety in a climate of hypervigilance towards risk mitigation.

Age-Appropriate Learning and Recreation Spaces: Students require age-appropriate learning and recreation spaces, underpinned by the principles of universal design. Inclusive design supports the dignity of users, who are children, staff and families. AGPPA urges designers to be cognisant of the total school experience, which sees children, families and staff transition to and from places within and beyond the school's boundaries. All spaces need to foster access and participation.

We understand that some ACT school ovals may not be safe or fit for purpose under current policy and regulatory frameworks. All-weather recreation spaces are worthy of consideration, and should not be constrained to gyms and other sporting facilities. Spaces that enable students, staff and communities to relate with Country, and engage in nature play will serve our children, staff, families and the environment well.

Consideration of the External Environment Including Climate Awareness:

Supporting students' relationship to Country is a priority in ACT Schools, which value and acknowledge ancient ways of knowing, being and doing. Climate awareness is an outcome of responsible delivery of the Australian Curriculum, and a necessary consideration in design and retrofitting of school infrastructure in the ACT Schools which require appropriate climate control systems to manage extreme temperatures. Effective energy-efficient design, upgrade and technologies across all schools will enable modelling and demonstration of living with a light footprint. Currently schools do not have the resources to invest in renewable technologies.

Learning Interactions Between Teachers, Spaces and Pedagogy: The Australian Curriculum provides a robust framework for quality education service delivery. The articulation of national Professional Standards for Teachers also influences teacher quality and practice throughout the ACT. As professional learning communities cultivate and harness specialist skills, spaces for specialised learning have become increasingly important. Modern teaching spaces need to be designed for collaboration, differentiation, and inquiry within a supportive learning environment. Schools require flexible spaces that accommodate a range of group sizes and needs, and are adaptable to provide different activities, collaboration and student support options. Visibility between classrooms, in corridors and flexible cultural spaces is also important.

Cross-cultural impact: Consideration should be given to capacity for new and existing schools to integrate cultural spaces such as prayer rooms, yarning circles and outdoor learning areas, maintaining the principle of flexibility so that spaces can be adapted and responsive to the variety of pedagogical approaches used in schools.

Context for students from varying income backgrounds: Public primary schools are inclusive, and the staff within them are committed to delivering programs to support and deliver equity and excellence for all learners. They provide neutral settings for connection and collaboration. Accessible meeting rooms for external organisations and allied health professionals who support students and families are increasingly required in primary schools. In addition, AGPPA supports consideration for provision of bathrooms, laundry, and kitchen facilities to support students who may need extra care at school.

Use of Technology: A degree of future-proofing needs to be built in and considered for all infrastructure. In the early 2000s, schools spent tens of thousands of dollars hard-wiring data ports into their schools. Within 5 years, every school had wifi. Whilst it is hard to predict the future, due consideration needs to be given to the emerging technologies.

Optimal School Size: Schools require the capacity to provide safe and supportive environments for students and staff while promoting positive learning outcomes, culture, and workload management. The optimal school population size for the best student learning outcomes may vary depending on the context and specific characteristics of the school. However, research suggests that smaller schools may be associated with better academic outcomes for students and offer benefits in terms of student engagement and teacher collaboration. We recommend consideration of specific, lower limits to school capacity based on this evidence and research, and experiences gained through education responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Hybrid models of education, and innovative service delivery may well challenge the prevailing perceptions of optimal school size.

Synergies with the wider community: The affordance of a one service model, and cross agency collaboration creates an interesting context for public education in the ACT. To meet the needs and aspirations of the Canberra Community, AGPPA would encourage funding approaches that recognise schools as community hubs. A community's children are its greatest asset, and flourishing schools support flourishing communities. Schools with quality infrastructure - inside and out - are positioned well to bring together partnerships to meet the needs of all.

AGPPA recognises the impact that management of schools for community use has on school administrative staff. Additional responsibilities related to community use require additional resources and support, to ensure workload is manageable, and service quality is outstanding.

It is pertinent to strike a balance between functionality and aesthetics in relation to infrastructure. While it is important to ensure that schools are modern and inviting places for students and the community, this should not come at the expense of safety and practicality. Car parks, traffic flow, pedestrian safety, and street appeal are all important design considerations. However, it is essential to prioritise the needs of students and staff over the desires of the wider community when making decisions about school infrastructure.

Long-term planning and demographic change: Demographic changes are a reality, and school facilities are significant assets. They hold strong emotional investment in communities. AGPPA supports repurposing school infrastructure whilst retaining ownership in contexts of fluctuating enrollment. As the ACT community grows and changes, AGPPA encourages the Standing Committee to reflect on past experiences of school closure in the jurisdiction. This could help to mitigate the risks to student learning outcomes and staff wellbeing, as well as minimising the substantial costs of establishing new schools. By adopting a future focused approach to educational infrastructure, the ACT Government can help to ensure that students and staff have access to high-quality educational facilities, irrespective of changes in population demographics. Again, the response of the education community to the pandemic holds lessons and possibilities.

This submission offers the perspective of Primary School principals, who recognise that the design, construction, and maintenance of school infrastructure in the ACT should prioritise student outcomes, staff retention, and the health and wellbeing of school leaders.

