



Elizabeth Lee MLA

Liberal Member for Kurrajong

Shadow Minister for Education
Shadow Minister for the Environment
Shadow Minister for Disability

Ms Joy Burch MLA
Speaker
ACT Legislative Assembly
Civic Square London Circuit
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Madam Speaker, *joy*

**Standing Committee on Administration and Procedure Inquiry into protocols for visits
by members to government schools**

You wrote to all MLAs on 19 February 2019 requesting submissions to the above Committee's inquiry into protocols for visits by Members to government schools.

Please find enclosed my submission to that Inquiry in my capacity as a Kurrajong MLA and also as Shadow Education Minister.

I apologise that the enclosed submission is outside the requested date.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Lee MLA
Shadow Minister for Education
Member for Kurrajong

Sorry it's late!

SUBMISSION

On 14 February 2019, I moved the following motion in the ACT Legislative Assembly:
That this Assembly:

1) notes that:

- a) government school visits by MLAs serve a valuable purpose in increasing an MLA's knowledge of the ACT school system and developing an appreciation of the talent and enthusiasm of students and teachers in ACT schools;
- b) recent publicity has highlighted the difficult arrangements that surround MLAs accepting invitations from government schools to attend activities and events at their school;
- c) this has created embarrassment and frustration for government schools and MLAs alike;
- d) no such restrictions are applied by independent and Catholic schools for visits by interested parliamentarians, at the Territory or at the Federal level;
- e) there is not a current written, publicly available policy for government schools to follow or for P&C Associations to refer to when inviting MLAs to their school;
- f) that such restrictions are not common in other jurisdictions; and

2) calls on the Standing Committee on Administration and Procedure to:

- a) examine whether the protocols in place around the permissions for MLAs to visit or attend school events constitute an impediment to the Members performing their function as MLAs and in complying with the Code of Conduct for All Members of the Legislative Assembly; and
- b) report back to the ACT Legislative Assembly on these protocols by the last sitting day in May 2019.

I moved this motion because of ongoing challenges in securing access for visits to ACT government schools experienced by myself and other MLAs on both sides of the Chamber. These difficulties were the subject of media commentary and highlighted the embarrassment and conflicting responses schools and MLAs had experienced in recent months.

As Shadow Education Minister, I am frequently and regularly invited to attend non-government schools – to the opening of a new building, to learn about plans for growth, to attend a concert or an awards ceremony or simply to become more familiar with the particular school.

When I took on the Education portfolio in February 2018, as is the usual practice, I submitted a request to the Education Minister's office for government school visits. There were 15 schools listed in this list.

In that request, I acknowledged that I was willing to comply with what I understood to be the usual practice – namely, that visits were not be scheduled for the first or last week of term; that they would be scheduled for between 10am and 2pm; that a visit could not be scheduled

for a school in which there was an active incident investigation. I also acknowledged that a representative from the Education Directorate would accompany every visit.

However, the response was slow and many of the schools requested in that first email I am still yet to be allowed to visit.

In April 2018, I wrote again proposing a second tranche of 15 schools, many of them being those requested in my first request made in February 2018.

Prior to my February 2019 motion, I was granted visits to 6 schools over the course of almost a year (the first visit happening more than three months after my first request and also after my follow up request):

Palmerston District Primary School (21 May 2018)
Southern Cross Early Childhood Centre (22 May 2018)
Black Mountain School (31 August 2018)
UC Kaleen High School (4 September 2018)
Richardson Primary School (12 September 2018)
Mount Stromlo High (12 September 2018)

In the days following the debate of my February 2019 motion, I was granted visits to 3 additional schools:

Cranleigh School (13 March 2019)
Kaleen Primary School (14 March 2019)
Lyneham High School (27 March 2019)

Further, the following 4 school visits have since been scheduled:

Amaroo School (8 May 2019)
Dickson College (8 May 2019)
Duffy Primary (9 May 2019)
Canberra High (9 May 2019)

As can be seen from the above timetable, the process has been slow, although the granting of requests has increased since the debate of my February 2019 motion.

During the debate of the February 2019 motion, the Minister said¹: "*The mechanisms apply to all government schools and where appropriate, I have not stood in the way of members engaging directly with schools.*"

I would challenge that statement. In my own case, as Shadow Education Minister, being forced to request (including a follow up due to lack of a response) and eventually being granted 'permission' to visit 6 schools over the course of almost a year, when 30 schools

¹ [1] ACT Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 14 February 2019, 239 (Yvette Berry MLA).

were requested, is tantamount to the Minister 'standing in the way' of 'myengaging directly with schools'.

Another colleague has advised me that in May 2018, a principal of an ACT government school was apparently advised by the Education Directorate that she was not permitted to meet with local Canberra Liberals MLAs at an offsite location.

In that same debate the Minister also said:²

"It is troubling that this motion is all about what MLAs can get out of involving themselves in school communities. It does not consider why schools exist, and the implications of what Ms Lee is suggesting for students in the school. Ms Lee seems to suggest that it is reasonable that schools should be available for politicians to wander through for electoral purposes at their own convenience. I am afraid this is not okay."

This statement is downright untrue.

I and all my Canberra Liberals colleagues appreciate and understand the necessary and appropriate limitations on visits to schools in our electorates. Despite slow responses from the Minister's office, I have never attempted to 'wander through schools for electorate purposes at our own convenience'. Nor have any of my Canberra Liberals colleagues.

I have never sought to make political publicity out of any school visit. I have not, and I am not aware of any Canberra Liberals MLA who has sought to introduce political material into any school or to visit for any political reason - whether government or non-government school - at any time.

I have followed every single direction given by the Minister's office about these visits including being accompanied by at least one Directorate staff member at all times, not taking any photographs and taking the directions so seriously that I have not even followed up with so much as a 'thank you card' or sent any government school principals and their teachers a 'happy world teachers day' card.

It makes for very awkward conversations when principals and teachers welcome me so warmly and ask me to visit "at any time" and I have to explain that we are not "allowed" to.

Government school visits by MLAs serve a valuable purpose in increasing an MLA's knowledge of the ACT school system and developing an appreciation of the talent and enthusiasm of students and teachers in ACT schools.

To thwart that ability to increase knowledge of our government school system is counter-productive. If we only have access to non-government schools, it stands to reason it is those schools we understand better.

The current Education Directorate website references two protocols for school visits. Neither are dated so it is not certain whether one supersedes or is complementary to the other. One

² Ibid

requires visit approval from the Directorate; the other requires approval from the Minister. Whether that is one and the same thing is debatable and open to interpretation.

The Education Minister has frequently suggested that Members of the Opposition ought to reasonably know something or other when we ask questions about process, policy or practice and almost chastise us for asking the questions. However, without an opportunity to talk to teachers who teach at government schools, how are we to understand the culture; understand the strengths; understand the ins and outs of any particular school and show support to our local communities?

I was not in the Assembly when previous Education Ministers and previous Shadow Ministers had the portfolio, but I am told it was a lot more open and requests were a lot more graciously and expeditiously managed.

Sadly, that is not my experience under current circumstances, although since my February 2019 motion was debated, I appreciate the Education Minister's office getting in touch with me to organise more school visits for March and May 2019 that I outlined above.

During the debate of my February 2019 motion, the Education Minister raised concerns that *"In the ACT in multi-member electorates that could mean 25 members showing up to a school."*³ She went on to say that those visits might coincide with a critical incident or other inappropriate timing.

It is a sad indicator of the lack of trust and confidence the Education Minister has in the elected Members of the Assembly, and in the hardworking principals of ACT schools that she does not think MLAs or principals capable of approaching visits with the appropriate sensitivity and professionalism that they require. These are not valid reasons why the current practice on government school visits should not be reviewed.

In Victoria for example, the policy finds a reasonable balance by giving agency and responsibility to principals to make appropriate judgment calls on managing school visits.⁴ After all, the principals are in the best position to make decisions about the most appropriate time and limitations for visits by MLAs. It is extraordinary that in the ACT where principals have more autonomy over the management of their schools than any other jurisdiction, that the issue of school visits by MLAs is micromanaged by the Education Minister's office.

The government schools that I have had the chance to visit have all, without exception, been wonderful experiences and have added enormously to my knowledge and appreciation of the ACT education system.

I am confident that the Standing Committee on Administration and Procedure will be able to develop a set of protocols that delivers on the dual requirements of providing opportunities for all MLAs to be better informed about the ACT education system while not detracting from

³ [1] ACT Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 14 February 2019, 239 (Yvette Berry).

⁴ [3] School Policy – Protocols for Members of Parliament Visiting Schools
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/spag/management/Pages/mpvisit.aspx>

the important day to day administration in our schools. Such protocols could also cover invitations to awards ceremonies, fetes and other school social functions.

Schools are an integral part in any local community. We have 88 government schools in the ACT with a student enrolment of roughly 49,000 students and over 5,000 teachers and support staff.

A significant number of our constituents in every one of our electorates has a connection with a school – either as a parent or grandparent, a teacher, a volunteer, an ancillary worker.

Establishing a transparent set of protocols for school visits, including attendance at speech days, awards ceremonies, sports days, fetes, etc will reduce the risk of further embarrassment to MLAs and the schools who have invited MLAs in good faith to attend a school only to be told to withdraw the invitation.

It will greatly contribute to all MLAs' understanding and appreciation of government schools in the ACT and it will lead to greater understanding and clarify issues that face our school communities.



Elizabeth Lee MLA

Shadow Minister for Education

6 May 2019

