



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION  
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA (Chair), Mr Jonathan Davis MLA (Deputy  
Chair), Ms Nicole Lawder MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the Future of School Infrastructure in the ACT

**Submission Number: 01**

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# ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

*The parent voice on public education*

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## Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion Inquiry into the Future of School Infrastructure in the ACT

March 2023



### ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

*The parent voice on public education*

ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations is the representative body for Parent & Citizen associations in the ACT. Council represents parents and carers in ACT public schools.

*We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands and waters where we live, work and learn, and pay my respects to elders past, present, and future.*

Authorised by Veronica Elliott for the ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

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We are the peak body for parent associations, representing over 60,000 parents in ACT public schools.

*We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands where we live, work and learn, and pay our respects to elders past, present, and future.*

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## Executive Summary

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) is a non-profit, non-government representative organisation whose objectives are to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliate parent & citizens associations (P&Cs) and make representations to government on behalf of parents and carers across all ACT public schools.

This submission is based on engagement with our member P&Cs and the ongoing business of Council. The key messages we continue to hear from members about school infrastructure are:

- schools need to be accessible for all;
- capacity pressures need to be addressed; and
- older schools need to be refurbished to meet current expectations.

Infrastructure plays an important role in schools by providing welcoming, enriching environments where all students can access learning. Council considers that schools and their communities need a clear and equitable framework to guide the development of school infrastructure for future generations.

Should the committee require clarification or more information please contact our office on 6241 5759 or via email: [contact@actparents.org.au](mailto:contact@actparents.org.au)

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

Council expects classrooms be designed to be accessible learning environments for students, to meet a variety of needs. Council considers that innovative solutions promoting accessibility should be prioritised in classroom design of new schools and those undergoing refurbishment.

### Recommendation 2

The ACT Government should provide funding to retrofit all ACT public schools to ensure that school infrastructure supports all students to access and engage in learning, by providing ramps, lifts, accessible toilets, sensory spaces, quiet and calm spaces, assistive technology and modifications across schools to make the whole school site sensory friendly.

### Recommendation 3

The Education Directorate should invest in accessibility upgrades across ACT public schools as a matter of priority with the goal of having all public schools accessible by 2030.

### Recommendation 4

Council recommends that demountable classrooms are only used for temporary increases in student capacity. Permanent growth in student projections should be accompanied by permanent classrooms with additional school facilities.

### Recommendation 5

Council contends that parents would feel re-assured to see medium and long-term capacity plans for their schools, especially where projections show they may reach capacity.

### Recommendation 6

The ACT Government should use enrolment projection data to address capacity pressures and initiate infrastructure projects before schools exceed capacity to ensure that school infrastructure continues to meet the needs of its student population.

### Recommendation 7

The ACT Government fund a cross-directorate approach to regional and town planning to ensure schools can begin planning for increases to capacity, and to allow land for new schools to be set aside.

### Recommendation 8

Council calls for an investment by the ACT Government to refurbish older ACT public schools to ensure that classroom design and school amenities meet current standards and facilitate modern learning environments.

### Recommendation 9

Council suggests the Education Directorate develop an equitable system to install heating and cooling in all ACT schools, for student and teacher comfort.

### Recommendation 10

The Education Directorate needs to have oversight over school infrastructure and facility maintenance to ensure that ACT schools are appropriately and equitably maintained. Council recommends a centralised team of property professionals is appointed to collaboratively lead development of school infrastructure and facility condition reports, management and maintenance plans (short, medium and long-term) in accordance with school needs.

#### **Recommendation 11**

Council recommends that schools with capacity pressures be prioritised for traffic management plans. Additionally, permanent school expansions should include additional corresponding car parking and traffic management measures.

#### **Recommendation 12**

A wholistic approach to development approval for development sites near schools should include traffic and parking management plans, to avoid increasing safety risk to students.

#### **Recommendation 13**

Council considers schools could benefit from access to centralised expert advice in the design and location of bike and scooter storage facilities.

#### **Recommendation 14**

Decision to fence or not-fence ACT public schools should be made by the school community with some input by local community. The protection and safeguarding of public school infrastructure and facilities, to reduce maintenance costs, must be prioritised over local community access.

## Introduction

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) is a non-profit, non-government representative organisation whose objectives are to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliate parent & citizens associations (P&Cs) and make representations to government on behalf of parents and carers across all ACT public schools.

At a minimum, P&Cs and their parents and carers want ACT public schools to be safe, accessible and comfortable places. However, they also expect all public schools to be inspiring, welcoming places, where students can shine. To achieve this Council considers that schools and their communities need a clear and equitable framework to guide the development of school infrastructure for future generations.

Council consulted with P&Cs on the issue of school infrastructure to inform our submission to the Committee's inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure in 2021. At that time P&Cs took considerable effort to ensure that their needs were identified and heard.

Council was pleased to see that many of our recommendations were included in the Committee's report which was released on 5 May 2022. Council also notes the government response, which was tabled on 20 September 2022.

Council considers that many of the issues raised in our previous submission are still relevant. In particular, we feel that the government should make a greater commitment in the area of school infrastructure to ensure that:

- schools are accessible places for all;
- capacity pressures are addressed; and
- older school infrastructure is refurbished to provide high quality learning environments and amenities for all.

This submission draws from our 2021 submission which was based on feedback from P&Cs, feedback collected at member meetings and in some cases, feedback provided directly by parents and carers.

Should the committee require clarification or more information please contact our office on 6241 5759 or via email: [contact@actparents.org.au](mailto:contact@actparents.org.au)

## **Accessible places for all**

Council supports inclusive education, where every student is supported to access and engage with high quality learning and be an active participant in their school community. Appropriate infrastructure plays an important role in ensuring that students with disability can access school facilities and learning in the same way as other students.

Parents and carers expect schools to be accessible places for all. Council expects new schools to be designed and constructed to meet accessibility standards. Council acknowledges that accessibility is a particular issue for the ACT's older public schools. Understandably, retrofitting older schools is costly, complicated by additional factors such as the presence of hazardous materials and may include the need for re-design.

Council understands that schools with students requiring modifications to allow accessibility are prioritised. However, Council has heard that currently adjustments for physical disabilities can still take a long time to be met. In the meantime, students wait and are unable to access school as their peers do. Council believes that students shouldn't have to wait for the school's physical infrastructure to be upgraded and that all schools should be accessible to people with disabilities. As such Council contends that significant funding should be provided to retrofit older schools to be accessible for all by 2030.

When designing new schools or planning upgrades to existing schools Council believes that consideration should be given to the accessibility of the full school site, including access to playground equipment and outdoor recreation spaces, toilets, and general movement around the school.

School accessibility infrastructure upgrades should also include the addition of sensory/quiet spaces and assistive technologies to ensure that all schools can provide an inclusive physical environment to support all students with disabilities. Consideration of the overall sensory environment across the entire school site also needs to be taken into account with lighting, colours of walls, soundproofing, flexibility in design and layout of classrooms all important accessibility considerations.

Council notes that making schools accessible not only benefits students with disability but benefits the broader school community including parents with prams, parents and carers with disability, staff with disability and students with temporary injuries.

### **Recommendation 1**

Council expects classrooms be designed to be accessible learning environments for students, to meet a variety of needs. Council considers that innovative solutions promoting accessibility should be prioritised in classroom design of new schools and those undergoing refurbishment.

### **Recommendation 2**

The ACT Government should provide funding to retrofit all ACT public schools to ensure that school infrastructure supports all students to access and engage in learning, by providing ramps, lifts, accessible toilets, sensory spaces, quiet and calm spaces, assistive technology and modifications across schools to make the whole school site sensory friendly.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Education Directorate should invest in accessibility upgrades across ACT public schools as a matter of priority with the goal of having all public schools accessible by 2030.

## Identify and respond to capacity pressures

Planning for new schools and increases to existing schools' capacity has been an ongoing concern for P&Cs, parents and families over recent years. Council remains concerned that the ACT Government's commitment to building new schools, and expanding others is too slow and places an unreasonable capacity pressure on existing schools. P&Cs, parents and carers continue to identify that capacity pressures at a number of schools are compromising the educational experience of students.

School infrastructure and facilities should allow schools to operate in an educationally best practice manner. Currently, the capacity pressures in some schools all over the ACT are so strong that compromises are being made to accommodate more students. Over the last few years P&Cs have identified the permanent loss of school libraries, loss of specialist facilities such as music and art rooms, school halls which are unable to cater for whole of school events, insufficient bathrooms, insufficient traffic and parking; and rostered access to facilities at lunchtimes: libraries, playgrounds and outdoor spaces. Whilst short-term compromises may be acceptable, Council considers that the ACT Government needs to decide how long these compromises are in place. Feedback from P&Cs clearly indicates that families want schools which don't compromise on educational experiences. At the same time, P&Cs recognise and appreciate that their school principals work tirelessly to meet student needs within the available budget and infrastructure.

Schools with capacity issues highlighted that as the school grows, recreation spaces often shrink to make way for more classrooms. One school noted that access to playground equipment is rostered as there are too many students to allow all students to have access every day. This resulted in students as young as Year 1 only having access to playground equipment at school one day a week.

Increases to urban density arising from urban infill is seeing permanent increases in the demand for schooling across the ACT. The effect of permanent increases in capacity are best demonstrated by the enrolment data for schools in the Inner North, most of which are at or above capacity. Council considers that demountable classrooms are only a temporary measure, to cater for temporary increases in student enrolments. P&Cs believe that permanent growth in student projections should be accompanied by permanent school classrooms, with increases to corresponding school facilities. Many P&Cs of schools with capacity pressures have identified the use of demountable classrooms without increases to the capacity of bathrooms, the library, playgrounds, outdoor spaces, halls and parking.

Council notes enrolment projection data provided by Minister Berry in her submission to the inquiry into the Management of ACT School Infrastructure, dated 4 February 2022. This data provides an insight into where there will likely be capacity pressures in the system in the coming years. While many school populations remain relatively stable over the forecast period, some schools are facing the prospect of their student populations doubling by 2030. Other schools, already facing capacity pressures are expected to grow further. Council notes that there are some major infrastructure projects underway that will address some of these issues at some of these schools but not all. Council would expect that planning is underway now to ensure that where the projected growth of a school population approaches its capacity it is met with an appropriate response (which may include the provision of new infrastructure). Council would also like to see that information communicated to school communities.

However, whilst Council acknowledges the infrastructure work in the pipeline Council contends that the infrastructure response has been slow, leaving cohorts of students with sub-optimal learning environments. Gungahlin College, for example, has faced significant capacity pressures for a



number of years. Council welcomes the promise of a new college for the Gungahlin region but notes that this is only in the early scoping stages and still some time from completion. Measures to address the capacity issues at Gungahlin College are currently underway with some solutions likely to be implemented this year (including demountable classrooms), and others not likely to be in place until at least 2024. Council also notes that while the infrastructure solutions at Gungahlin College increase the available teaching space there is very limited capacity remaining to increase breakout or study areas.

#### **Recommendation 4**

Council recommends that demountable classrooms are only used for temporary increases in student capacity. Permanent growth in student projections should be accompanied by permanent classrooms with additional school facilities.

#### **Recommendation 5**

Council contends that parents would feel re-assured to see medium and long-term capacity plans for their schools, especially where projections show they are approaching capacity.

#### **Recommendation 6**

The ACT Government should use enrolment projection data to address capacity pressures and initiate infrastructure projects, where appropriate, before schools exceed capacity to ensure that school infrastructure continues to meet the needs of its student population.

#### **Recommendation 7**

The ACT Government fund a cross-directorate approach to regional and town planning to ensure schools can begin planning for increases to capacity, and to allow land for new schools to be set aside.

### **Refurbish older schools to meet current expectations**

There is a significant age difference in school infrastructure across the ACT, with some of the ACT's oldest public schools approaching 100 years old, whilst on the other end of the spectrum we have brand-new schools currently under construction. The classroom design of ACT schools varies depending on the era of construction. Newer schools tend to have more flexible learning spaces which can be adjusted to meet the changing needs of a school population over time. However, the oldest ACT schools tend to have a more traditional design while those in-between feature large open plan rooms designed for three to four classes.

P&Cs, parents and carers want to see carefully planned classroom design that is reflected in the refurbishment of older schools. Critically, large open plan classrooms that are often noisy reverberating environments, can reduce a student's capacity to engage in learning. Experience suggests that this often affects students with sensory needs, learning difficulties and those with disabilities.

Another significant concern for P&Cs in older school buildings is the lack of effective heating and cooling. Parents and carers understand that students and teachers work best when they are comfortable. Council considers the Education Directorate should maintain data identifying schools without adequate heating and cooling. Council would be supportive of a coordinated and systemic approach to ensuring all public schools are heated and cooled to ensure student and teacher comfort and maximise educational outcomes.

Other facilities such as toilets and recreation areas need to be upgraded to ensure that they are functional. Council heard from many P&Cs with concerns about the state of toilets at their

children's schools. Several P&Cs also indicated that school recreation spaces have been neglected and in need of attention. Some P&Cs highlighted the poor condition or state of disrepair of sporting facilities at their school, such as ovals and courts (basketball and netball).

#### **Recommendation 8**

Council calls for an investment by the ACT Government to refurbish older ACT public schools to ensure that classroom design and school amenities meet current standards and facilitate modern learning environments.

#### **Recommendation 9**

Council suggests the Education Directorate develop an equitable system to install heating and cooling in all ACT schools, for student and teacher comfort.

#### **Recommendation 10**

The Education Directorate needs to have oversight over school infrastructure and facility maintenance to ensure that ACT schools are appropriately and equitably maintained. Council recommends a centralised team of property professionals is appointed to collaboratively lead development of school infrastructure and facility condition reports, management and maintenance plans (short, medium and long-term) in accordance with school needs.

### **Other issues related to the Terms of Reference**

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

Safe travel to school remains a key concern for P&Cs across the ACT. Whilst active travel, such as riding or walking to school is a healthy and environmentally friendly choice, this is not possible for all families. The distance to school may be too far or it may simply be more practical and time efficient for parents to drop children off or pick them up on the way to or from work. For those students that ride to school we have heard from P&Cs that there is a need for adequate bike storage facilities. Council appreciates that P&Cs and schools often work collaboratively to provide small scale school infrastructure, and bike storage facilities are an example of the types of projects undertaken.

P&Cs, parents and carers consistently identify the need for better parking and traffic management across ACT schools. Council understands that school car parks are not designed to cater to the entire school population at a point in time. Council notes that insufficient car parking, combined with a lack of clear drop-off and pick-up systems appears to plague all schools. However, school expansion places significant demand on school car parking and drop-off and pick-systems, which Council considers must increase safety risks. Furthermore, some schools are facing additional traffic and parking issues with an increased volume of near-by construction and development. P&Cs have reported obstructed views from illegal on and off-street parking, and difficulty to access school or legal on-street car parking due to additional demand, which is considered to increase student safety risks.

#### **Recommendation 11**

Council recommends that schools with capacity pressures be prioritised for traffic management plans. Additionally, permanent school expansions should include additional corresponding car parking and traffic management measures.

#### **Recommendation 12**

A wholistic approach to development approval for development sites near schools should include traffic and parking management plans, to avoid increasing safety risk to students.

### **Recommendation 13**

Council considers schools could benefit from access to centralised expert advice in the design and location of bike and scooter storage facilities.

#### *Optimal school size*

Council notes that there is a substantial difference in school size across the ACT. Council believes that small, medium or large sized schools can deliver positive educational outcomes for students. What is more important than the size of the school is having infrastructure that meets the needs of the number of students at the school. Many of the infrastructure related issues that Council hears about occur when schools are exceeding capacity.

#### *Synergies with the wider community*

School facilities are a significant community resource and should be planned as such. They also represent an opportunity for schools to generate a small amount of income that can be reinvested into the school infrastructure through hire to community and sporting groups.

In the ACT, public school facilities, particularly playgrounds and ovals have customarily been accessible to local communities. However, over recent years many public schools have resorted to fencing school facilities to protect and safeguard assets from the impacts of vandalism and to mitigate risks associated with hazard management. Information from P&Cs identifies that schools which are fenced often have better and well-maintained outdoor facilities such as outdoor classroom areas, ovals, and playgrounds. Council expects that fencing a school reduces costs associated with vandalism and decreases the less visible staffing costs required for hazard management. Accordingly, schools with fencing and their P&Cs appear to have more resources to invest in outdoor school infrastructure and facilities. Council appreciates that decisions to fence a school may restrict access to local communities, however, considers that protection, safeguarding of public school infrastructure and facilities and cost reduction must be prioritised.

At the same time, Council recognises and respects that school communities (staff, students, families, P&C) may not support school fencing. Council recommends that decisions to fence a school be made by the school community, with some input from local community. Local community organisations are able to formally access school facilities with an agreement in place, with a cost-based recovery fee. Council believes that charging small fees allow schools to recuperate costs whilst promoting social capital of the local community.

### **Recommendation 14**

Decision to fence or not-fence ACT public schools should be made by the school community with some input by local community. The protection and safeguarding of public school infrastructure and facilities, to reduce maintenance costs, must be prioritised over local community access.