



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA (Chair), Mr Jonathan Davis MLA (Deputy Chair),
Mr Peter Cain MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure

Submission Number: 2

Date Authorised for Publication: 27 April 2021

Submission to the ACT Government Inquiry into the
Management of ACT School Infrastructure

Anne Quinn

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

26 April 2021

Contents

Introduction	1
Key points.....	1
Value of access to school ovals in our suburbs.....	2
School ovals: A precious public resource needing public accountability	3
Protecting school ovals	4
Example: St Mary MacKillop College oval in Wanniassa, ACT	5
Future.....	6
Recommendations	6
Broad	6
Specific	6

Introduction

This submission addresses item 1(j), 'accessibility of school facilities by local communities', listed in the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into the Management of ACT School Infrastructure.

In particular, I wish to address the accessibility of school ovals by local communities.

Key points

- Publicly accessible ovals play two important roles in our suburbs:
 1. they contribute to a network of interlinked green spaces, and
 2. as stand-alone spaces, they allow for a unique set of activities.
- Research and the ACT Government acknowledge the importance of these two roles.
- School ovals occupy significant areas of land within our suburbs. Historically and culturally, they have been part of our communal green space. With increasing development, this green space becomes more precious to the community.
- School ovals closed to the public sit unused for two-thirds of their possible usage time. This is a significant wasted resource especially considering the government funding received by all schools and claims that it will be a challenge to meet the cost of maintaining other community ovals.
- All land-users, government and non-government schools included, should be accountable to Canberra's planning strategy.
- Schools are part of the community in which they are located.
- Closing communities out of school ovals by installing locked fences is a disproportionate response to the risk of damage to the oval. There are more community-minded solutions.
- We have a choice: work to retain and restore our connected green spaces and connected communities, or abandon our vision for Canberra.

Value of access to school ovals in our suburbs

- Publicly accessible ovals play two important roles in our suburbs:
 1. they contribute to a network of interlinked green spaces, and
 2. as stand-alone spaces, they allow for a unique set of activities.
- Research and the ACT Government acknowledge the importance of these two roles.
- School ovals occupy significant areas of land within our suburbs. Historically and culturally, they have been part of our communal green space. With increasing development, this green space becomes more precious to the community.

Access to open, connected green areas in our suburbs is one of Canberra's many attractions. Parks, nature reserves, playgrounds and ovals all contribute to a network of interlinked green spaces. Taken as a whole they make an immense contribution to the community as green thoroughfares providing unimpeded walkability and significant aesthetic value.

As stand-alone spaces, each with their own unique features, green areas allow for a range of activities. Grass ovals are flat, soft underfoot and expansive. These features mean we can play safely with young children, enjoy a game of social football with friends, exercise for fitness (running, interval training or safer walking for people experiencing physical challenges) or just enjoy the feel of cool grass, amongst other things. These are activities suited to ovals in particular.

Research has established that open, connected green spaces support our physical and mental health and contribute to a sense of community.¹ Canberra's planning strategy holds up as key strengths Canberra's "spatial foundations of liveability" including "open (green) space and recreation areas woven through where people live and work". The ACT Government promotes walkable communities and physically active lifestyles.² "Community connectedness", "liveable suburbs" and "green open spaces" are phrases repeated in the ACT Government's *Better Suburbs Statement*, attesting to the Government's and community's commitment to the value of access to connected green spaces in our suburbs.³

Schools occupy significant areas of land within our suburbs. Historically and culturally, school ovals have formed part of our communal green space. With other suburban land disappearing to development, it is important that school ovals, government and non-government, are retained or returned as publicly accessible green spaces outside of school hours.

¹ For example: Ives, C., Okes, C., Cooke, B., Gordon, A. and Bekessy, S. (2014) *Planning for green open space in urbanising landscapes (Final Report for Australian Government Department of Environment)*, Melbourne: School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, pp.10-14, retrieved from <https://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/pages/25570c73-a276-4efb-82f4-16f802320e62/files/planning-green-open-space-report.pdf>

² *Liveable Canberra – Strategic Directions*, retrieved from <https://www.planning.act.gov.au/act-planning-strategy/strategic-directions/liveable-canberra>

³ *Better Suburbs Statement 2030 (2018)*, pp.1-2, retrieved from https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/hdp.au.prod.app.act-yoursay.files/4215/3722/6646/Better_Suburbs_Statement_accessible_SEPTEMBER_2018.pdf

School ovals: A precious public resource needing public accountability

- School ovals closed to the public sit unused for two-thirds of their possible usage time. This is a significant wasted resource especially considering the government funding received by all schools and claims that it will be a challenge to meet the cost of maintaining other community ovals.
- All land-users, government and non-government schools included, should be accountable to Canberra's planning strategy.
- Schools are part of the community in which they are located.

Table 1 shows that, on average, a school uses its oval for around one third of the 'possible usage hours' in a year. If an oval is closed to the public outside school hours and during school holidays, the oval sits unused for two-thirds of its possible usage time.

Table 1: School oval possible usage hours in one year

	Hours/day	Days/week	Weeks/year	Total hours per year	% of total possible usage hours per year
Possible usage hours per year (A)					
Summer: 6am to 8pm	14	7	26	2,548	
Winter: 7am to 5pm	10	7	26	1,820	
Total possible usage hours per year				4,368	100%
Usage by school (B)					
8am to 4pm for 5 days a week for 40 weeks of year	8	5	40	1,600	37%
Possible usage by community (A-B=C)					
Before and after school during terms, school holidays				2,768	63%

This represents a significant wasted resource especially considering the government funding received by all schools in both the government and non-government sectors. Funding includes direct government funding, tax exemptions and other government assistance such as concessional land leases (ie land leases granted at below market value). Claims that non-government schools are 'private property' because the parents pay fees ignore this fact – all schools are publicly funded.

In addition, with questions raised in the *Better Suburbs Statement* about the financial viability of servicing other community ovals,⁴ it makes sense for school ovals, that must be

⁴ *Better Suburbs Statement 2030 (2018)*, op. cit., p.18

maintained for school purposes, to be considered part of the total oval resource and remain available for community use outside of school hours.

Schools must also be accountable. The fact that schools situated on land within suburban communities can deny public access to their ovals is at odds with the ACT Government's planning strategy. The ACT Government should hold all land-users – government and non-government schools included – accountable to the planning vision. Individual ACT citizens certainly are. Quite rightly, homeowners in Canberra are not permitted to erect front fences at their homes as this would detract from the "attractive interlinked environment for pedestrians".⁵ This should also apply to our suburban schools where large black security fences are locking out residents and detracting from the visual appeal of the suburb.

The 'private property' argument also depicts the school as an island, separate from the community in which it sits. The alternative view is that schools can play the role of a hub in a community, drawing residents together whether they have children at the school or not. The local school fete is a great example of this. Of course, the school's impact on a community may also be negative, such as when local streets are blocked by cars dropping off or picking up students. The point is that interplay between a school and the local residents is inevitable and we can either work together to make a great community – surely our vision – or we can disregard the relationship. When a school fences and locks its oval, they make a strong negative statement about that relationship.

Protecting school ovals

- Closing communities out of school ovals by installing locked fences is a disproportionate response to the risk of damage to the oval. There are more community-minded solutions.

Schools need to protect their property in a way that is proportionate to the risks. It is reasonable that school buildings may be closed off to unsupervised public use as there are built structures and equipment that could easily be damaged.

Ovals, on the other hand, represent a much lower risk, even taking into account their maintenance costs. The issues cited by schools about public access to their ovals include dog excrement, trespassing during school hours, and damage from vehicles.⁶ These represent a risk that can be managed with relatively low cost, community-friendly measures such as working with the community to raise awareness, installing signs about appropriate care for the oval, installing bag-dispensers and bins for dog excrement, or installing low, intermittent fences to stop vehicle access but allow pedestrians. Installing locked security fences around ovals is a disproportionate response to the problems.

⁵ ACT Planning and Land Authority (2008), *Residential Boundary Fences General Code, Part A, Element 2, point C*, in The Territory Plan 2008, retrieved from <https://legislation.act.gov.au/DownloadFile/ni/2008-27/copy/58671/PDF/2008-27.PDF>

⁶ *St Mary MacKillop College Newsletter*, Vol.2, 2021 (26 February 2021), p.3, retrieved from <https://www.mackillop.act.edu.au/index.php/our-school/publications-policies/newsletter/item/newsletter-2-2021>

Example: St Mary MacKillop College oval in Wanniasa, ACT

- Forty three years of community access to a local school oval was extinguished with no local consultation.
- A significant number of local residents and people from the broader community have raised concerns about the fence.
- The primary issue for the school was dog excrement.
- Other, more community-minded solutions that are more in line with the vision for Canberra are possible.
- ‘Out-of-area’ people are making decisions about local issues.

The construction in December 2020 of a two metre high fence around the oval at St Mary MacKillop College in Wanniasa is just one example of a Canberra school locking a local community out of a green space. The school did not consult with locals about the perceived problems, potential solutions and community connection to the oval. Instead, 43 years of community access was extinguished without a thought for the locals who have used and loved the space during that time. The visual and practical impact of the fence is devastating.

One hundred and nine people have signed an online petition seeking a more community-minded solution to the MacKillop College fence.⁷ Of these, 32 are local Wanniasa residents, with the remainder clearly concerned about the broader issue of locking communities out of green spaces.

The school says dog excrement on the oval was the primary issue prompting them to build the fence, with trespassing during school hours and vandalism cited as occasional problems. Understandably, the school needs to deal with these issues – they are annoying, inconvenient and, to the extent they occur, they compromise student and staff safety. However, as discussed, the response is totally disproportionate and completely at odds with Canberra’s planning vision. Many other more community-minded and green-space friendly solutions could solve these problems as outlined on page 4.

The reaction from the Principal in meetings with him also highlighted the issue that many of the school’s students and families are ‘out-of-area’ – that is, drawn from outside the local community.⁸ What happens in the local Wanniasa community is not the Principal’s concern. This means that ‘out-of-area’ people are making decisions about issues in a community that is not theirs. This disconnection is damaging. One MacKillop teacher commented to me privately that if the schools in her own suburb fenced their ovals she would be very upset about the loss of green space for her children. It is not acceptable that the Principal has not taken such a view into account.

⁷ www.change.org/keepitopenmackillop

⁸ I met with the Principal of St Mary MacKillop College personally to discuss the fence and local community concerns.

Future

- We have a choice: work to retain and restore our connected green spaces and connected communities, or abandon our vision for Canberra.

Some people argue that there are plenty of other green spaces available to local communities apart from school ovals, or that the fencing of school ovals has already happened so we can do nothing about it. However, this denies that we, as a community and as individual residents, voters, and law-makers, have agency and can exercise choice about the kind of city we want to live in. With each school oval that is fenced, we chip away at the vision of accessible, connected green spaces and connected communities and we settle for something less. But we can decide to manage school ovals, government and non-government, so that we retain and restore the school oval as part of that vision. It is a choice.

Recommendations

Broad

The ACT Government should require all land-users – government and non-government schools included – to be accountable to Canberra’s planning strategy and the vision for accessible and connected green spaces in our suburbs, and to be accountable to the local community in which they sit. This means recognising that all school ovals contribute to these accessible green spaces and that they are part of a local, communal resource.

Specific

As part of this, I propose the following four recommendations:

1. the ACT Government reinforces with all schools, but particularly schools accepting out-of-area students (in particular, non-government schools), the school’s role in the local community in which they sit and their responsibility to help foster community connection;
2. the ACT Government requires that all school ovals, whether attached to government or non-government schools, should remain open to the local community of individual residents outside of school hours – this could be included as a condition of the land leases for schools; and
3. the ACT Government works with local communities and government and non-government schools to develop a shared understanding of the value of the school oval to both parties and assist in developing community-minded solutions to protecting the school oval while allowing access to residents outside of school hours – this could include some of the suggestions outlined on page 4; and

4. the ACT Government reviews the existing government and non-government school oval fences and work with local communities and schools to re-open these ovals to the community, either by (in order of preference):
 - a. removing the fences (and possibly recommissioning them for use elsewhere), or
 - b. removing parts of the fences to allow pedestrian access but prevent vehicle access, or
 - c. following the NSW Government's recent 'Share our Space Program'⁹ approach by keeping the gates of locked ovals open during school holidays (and after school hours) and encouraging the public to use them.

Recommendations 3 and 4 may require funding to assist schools at the outset. They may also open up further ACT Government job opportunities, especially important during the COVID recovery, with employees working to facilitate and implement local school oval solutions.

⁹ NSW Government (2018), *Opening up school ovals and playgrounds for community use as part of \$290 million package*, Media release, retrieved from <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/opening-up-school-ovals-and-playgrounds-for-community-use-as-part-of-290-million>