



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), Ms Nicole Lawder MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the Future of School Infrastructure in the ACT

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Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion
ACT Legislative Assembly
via email: LCommitteeECI@parliament.act.gov.au

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To the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion,

INQUIRY INTO THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE ACT

The ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the Future of School Infrastructure in the ACT. ACTCOSS advocates for social justice in the ACT and represents not-for-profit community organisations. Our vision is that Canberra is a just, safe and sustainable community in which everyone has the opportunity for self-determination and a fair share of resources and services.

The ACT Government's Future of Education Strategy Phase Two Implementation Plan foregrounds inclusion for students with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as priority one. As stated in the plan, students with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are currently not benefiting equitably from improvements made in the areas of inclusion, student agency and wellbeing. Future decisions regarding school infrastructure must foreground the immediate needs of these students who are most vulnerable to discrimination, segregation and exclusion from full participation in high quality learning and education. We also refer you to our previous [submission](#) on the management of ACT school infrastructure.

All students in the ACT should have access to safe, healthy and local schools, particularly those living in disadvantaged and under-resourced areas. While this submission will largely focus on infrastructure to support inclusion in the school environment, ACTCOSS advocates for free public transport across the ACT, including for all school students with and without disabilities. This access should not be predicated on a parent or guardian's eligibility for concessions or a student's access to NDIS funding. Means testing student transport requires costly administration and risks excluding students who are most vulnerable to missing school due to circumstances outside of their control. Universal eligibility for transport options supports the ACT Government's commitment to address the barriers to educational engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and students with disabilities.

The future of infrastructure in ACT schools must be based on principles of universal design to support inclusive pedagogy, wellbeing, and accessibility for students, their families and community members. We recommend that the ACT Government investigate the South Australian Education Department's resources on universal design, including perspectives on how to best support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students with disabilities through the physical environment.¹ The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority

¹ Department for Education, Government of South Australia, [Designing buildings for everyone through universal design](#), Government of South Australia, 23 November 2022, accessed 14 March 2023.

National Quality Standards for early education and care settings promote a philosophy that encourages thinking of the physical environment as the “third teacher” for students, after educators and families.² This philosophy emphasises the importance of the structure of physical environments as a tool for fostering inclusive pedagogy over and beyond providing accessibility adaptations such as ramps and handrails. Universal design and investment in the physical environment promote the Future of Education Strategy goals to support agency and wellbeing for all students.

Change in this area is urgent as too many schools are inaccessible in the ACT. Advocacy for Inclusion’s White Paper on Education released in 2022 used Australian Electoral Commission data on schools as polling places to highlight issues of physical accessibility in ACT schools as an indicator. Only about 20% of schools used as polling places are accessible. Using the AEC’s (2022) expected election day polling places dataset, 88 schools (mix of primary, secondary, and religious) are used as polling places across the ACT. Of these only 18 (20.5%) are listed as ‘fully accessible’ and this only relates to the specific room where polling takes place.³

For children in early years and lower-primary education, play-based environments are essential for their cognitive, social, and emotional development. However, it is also important to recognise that older students in upper-primary and high school are still children and require opportunities for open-ended inquiry, exploration, and play. This consideration is important for all children, however, prioritising the availability of sensory activities, multimodal learning and open-ended play is a particularly significant consideration for children with disabilities, additional support needs and children who are vulnerable to disadvantage in traditional classroom environments. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to have experiences of grief and/or trauma and to be diagnosed with mental health or behavioural conditions⁴. As well, parents of children with disabilities have reported that the traditional, structured environment of a mainstream classroom, while seeking to be inclusive, can have a “pathologising”⁵ impact on children who may require adaptive and varied opportunities to experience and demonstrate learning. These outcomes may be prevented by designing classrooms that encourage creativity and exploration, as well as external learning environments that are engaging and stimulating for children of all ages and abilities, and through embedding culturally safe learning based in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being throughout the school environment.

² Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), [The Environment as the ‘Third Teacher’](#) [PDF 1,198KB], Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), February 2018, accessed 16 March 2023.

³ Advocacy for Inclusion, [White Paper on Education](#), Advocacy for Inclusion, 2 December 2022, accessed 31 March 2023.

⁴ Orygen Institute, [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and mental ill-health](#) [PDF 343KB], Orygen Institute, July 2018, p. 2, accessed 20 March 2023.

⁵ K McVilly, S Ainsworth, L Graham, M Harrison, V Sojo, C Spivakovsky, L Gale, A Genat, T Zirnsak, [Outcomes associated with ‘inclusive’, ‘segregated’ and ‘integrated’ settings: Accommodation and community living, employment and education](#), A research report commissioned by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, University of Melbourne, Australia, 7 March 2023, p. 92, accessed 14 March 2023.

ACTCOSS does not broadly support the ongoing renewal of infrastructure in specialist schools. While it is of utmost importance to improve the safety and quality of schools for students with disabilities, we support the goal of full inclusion and recommend that specialist schools be phased out as accessibility and inclusion improves in mainstream settings. We urge the committee to consider the recommendations put forth in the recent report from The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability on outcomes for students with disabilities associated with inclusive, segregated and integrated settings. The report finds five factors to be “core building blocks of a safe and effective inclusive education system”⁶ that may assist in guiding the ACT Government’s decision making on the future of inclusion in ACT schools. These factors include space, or the physical environment, and objects, as resources for learning that should be accessible, age appropriate and foster inclusivity.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, ACT schools need to be equipped with appropriate infrastructure to mitigate the spread of infectious diseases. While we understand that school ventilation, heating and cooling systems have been upgraded in some schools over the past few years, it is unclear whether all schools are meeting air quality standards or whether indoor air quality is being measured. As unpredictable and extreme temperatures, bushfires and infectious diseases will continue to impact school communities, it is important that the community is able to remain informed on the safety of ACT school students. Adequate ventilation, heating and cooling, air purification and minimum energy efficiency must be standard across all ACT schools to promote the health and safety of students and staff, particularly those who are vulnerable to infectious disease, extreme temperatures and exposure to airborne pollutants.

Improving physical accessibility and facilities for community use will promote relationship building between schools and their local communities. All decision making for the future of ACT schools’ infrastructure should recognise the significance of the role of the wider community and involve collaboration with local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community representatives, community representatives with disabilities and/or representatives from disabled peoples’ organisations (DPOs). An open and transparent process should be established to allow for input from families, educators, and other community members. Capacity planning should also be a priority, ensuring that school infrastructure is managed with future community needs in mind. Community facilities in school infrastructure design should prioritise accessibility and consider cultural significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as well as access to green space and community sporting facilities.

In consideration of the goal to develop the use of schools as community meeting places, we recommend that ACT schools be developed for use as community refuges during extreme weather events. As we have seen over the past few years, climate change will continue to cause unpredictable weather and events such as storms, bushfires and flash flooding. In the process of future-proofing schools to be as safe and climate-ready as possible for students, upgrading school facilities to service local community members in need of refuge in the case of

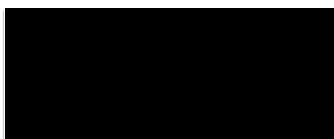
⁶ McVilly et al., *Outcomes associated with ‘inclusive’, ‘segregated’ and ‘integrated’ settings*, A research report commissioned by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, University of Melbourne, Australia, 7 March 2023, pp. 117-118, accessed 14 March 2023.



environmental emergencies would further promote positive relationships between schools and their communities as well as providing much-needed protection and security for vulnerable Canberrans.

This submission is endorsed by Advocacy for Inclusion.

Yours sincerely



Dr Gemma Killen
Interim Chief Executive Officer
ACT Council of Social Service

