



ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

The parent voice on public education

Mr Andrew Barr
Chief Minister & Treasurer
ACT Budget Consultation
Treasury Directorate
GPO Box 158
CANBERRA ACT 2601

28 June 2021

Dear Andrew,

On behalf of the ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council), I am writing to provide a submission to the 2021-22 ACT Budget Consultation.

Council is a non-profit, non-government representative organisation whose objectives are to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliate P&C Associations and make representations to government on behalf of parents of public school students.

I would be more than happy to meet with you to discuss our submission in more detail. If you have any questions about the attached submission, please do not hesitate to contact our office.

Yours Sincerely,

Alison Elliott
President
ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

We are the peak body for P&C Associations in the ACT, representing over 60,000 parents in 86 public schools.

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

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Budget Submission 2021 - 22



**ACT Council of
Parents & Citizens
Associations**

The parent voice on public education

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for Parent & Citizen associations in the ACT.
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Executive Summary

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) is pleased to provide the following submission for consideration in the ACT government's 2021-22 budget.

This submission includes 24 recommendations required for effective implementation of the Government's Future of Education Strategy.

Recommendation 1

Council reiterates the call for a new public school to be built in the Inner North.

Recommendation 2

Council also calls on the ACT Government to find a permanent solution, such as a new college, to address the growth projections for Dickson and Gungahlin Colleges.

Recommendation 3

Council recommends the ACT Government build new primary schools in central Belconnen and Woden to match increases in urban density.

Recommendation 4

Council recommends the ACT Government develop a cross-directorate approach to regional and town planning to ensure that schools can begin planning for increases to school capacity, and to allow land for new schools to be set aside.

Recommendation 5

Council suggests the ACT Government signal the importance of specialist school facilities by excluding these spaces from public school capacity calculations.

Recommendation 6

Council strongly recommends the ACT Government ensure a consistent process is developed and implemented to ensure Education Directorate funded infrastructure projects are equitably distributed across ACT public schools.

Recommendation 7

Council recommends the ACT Government establish an equitable school modernisation fund to create inspiring places which students are proud to belong to, where schools which have not previously benefited can be prioritised.

Recommendation 8

Council strongly recommends the ACT Government significantly increase long-term funding for the management and removal of hazardous materials in ACT public schools.

Recommendation 9

Council strongly recommends the ACT Government fund qualified infrastructure professionals to support schools with the management of school infrastructure and maintenance.

Recommendation 10

Council calls on the ACT Government to fund all of our recommendations to the ACT school infrastructure inquiry

Recommendation 11

Council recommends the ACT Government develop a strategy to protect schools from vandalism, including CCTV and fencing (where CCTV and fencing is supported by the school community).

Recommendation 12

Council strongly recommends the ACT Government increase real-time and accessible wellbeing and allied health supports available through public schools, to support student learning.

Recommendation 13

Council strongly encourages the ACT Government implement a plan to attract and retain public and private wellbeing and allied health services in the Canberra community.

Recommendation 14

Council calls on the ACT Government to embed a comprehensive evidenced-based relationships and sex education framework in public schools that:

- meets the needs of all students, including those with special education needs and disabilities,
- engages parents and carers early,
- explicitly teaches protective behaviours including body autonomy and consent consistently from preschool,
- is delivered by educators with specialist training,
- is accurate and age appropriate, be positively role-modelled in everyday school life,
- is embedded in expectations for school communities,
- is supported by all school staff,
- is integrated into school life rather than only taught in specific school years,
- is evaluated against accountability mechanisms.

Recommendation 15

Council suggests the ACT Government ensure the approach to individualised learning in public schools is implemented, to ensure that all students reach their full potential. Especially students with learning difficulties, gifted and talented students and those with disabilities and complex needs.

Recommendation 16

Council calls on the ACT Government to fund the development of a wholistic inclusive education framework to guide best practice inclusive education across public schools.

Recommendation 17

Council strongly recommends on the ACT Government to ensure that all educational professionals in public schools (school leaders, teachers and learning support assistants) have access to quality inclusive education professional development.

Recommendation 18

Council calls on the ACT Government to reduce the additional advocacy and administrative burden on parents and carers of students with disabilities or complex needs.

Recommendation 19

Council strongly recommends the ACT Government ensure that school infrastructure supports all students to engage in learning, particularly those with complex, challenging behaviours, by providing ramps, lifts, sensory spaces and quiet and calm spaces.

Recommendation 20

Council calls on the ACT Government to extend the commitment to offer remote and online learning at every public school for students who need it or are unable to attend.

Recommendation 21

Council calls on the ACT Government to ear-mark funding for qualified teacher librarian in every school. Placement of librarians in schools with lower socio-economic areas should be prioritised.

Recommendation 22

Council calls for the full and unconditional implementation of all recommendation by the [ACT Government Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools](#). Including a trustworthy and resolution-focused complaints handling process at the directorate and school levels, with a self-reporting portal for students and families to report incidents.

Recommendation 23

Council recommends the ACT Government continue to support a range of strategies to reduce bullying and violence in schools including, implementing the Smiling Minds mindfulness program, MIEACT's No Labels program and Menslink.

Recommendation 24

Council strongly recommends the ACT Government continue to find ways to support school communities connect, by considering the impact of policies and decisions on P&Cs.

Excellence in education

Council recommends the ACT Government supports budgetary initiatives to provide all public education students with an excellent experience of education. Council strongly considers the following initiatives will provide an excellent education for all public school students, irrespective of their postcode.

Quality learning environments

A quality educational experience needs a foundation of safe, accessible and comfortable public school infrastructure. Public schools work hard to offer students welcoming, inspiring places where students can shine. However, Council considers, significant resources are needed to ensure public school infrastructure can support quality educational experiences into the future.

Capacity planning and new schools

As Canberra's population rises and urban density increases, more schools are needed. Council recognises the significant commitment the ACT Government has made to building new public schools. Council considers the building of new schools has been too conservative and, that more schools are needed instead of school expansions which place unreasonable pressures on existing public schools.

Specialist facilities and outdoor areas

Council recognises that schools work hard to accommodate growing student numbers, but often this results in the permanent loss of important specialist facilities, such as libraries, music and art rooms, decreases available outdoor spaces due to demountable classrooms, places additional pressures on whole of school facilities such as toilets and canteens; and prevents whole of school activities and events like school assemblies. Parents and carers may be amenable to short-term compromises such as the rostering of access to playgrounds however, sustained growth in school capacity must not compromise on the quality of the educational experience.

Long-term plans to manage sustained growth

Additionally, the temporary measure of amending the Dickson College Priority Enrolment Area (PEA) to include students from Gungahlin is insufficient to meet the sustained projected growth. Council contends a permanent longer-term solution is required to meet growth projections for Gungahlin and Dickson Colleges.

Council is also concerned about the impact of significant increases to Belconnen, Weston Creek, Molonglo, Woden and Tuggeranong school populations, particularly due to planned brownfield development. Council considers longer-term cross-directorate planning is needed to ensure schools have adequate infrastructure and facilities to cope with increases in population from brownfield development. Council suggests that the impacts on schools from brownfield developments need to be considered and outlined in regional and town planning.

Recommendation 1

Council reiterates the call for a new public school to be built in the Inner North.

Recommendation 2

Council also calls on the ACT Government to find a permanent solution, such as a new college, to address the growth projections for Dickson and Gungahlin Colleges.

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Council recommends the ACT Government build new primary schools in central Belconnen and Woden to match increases in urban density.

Recommendation 4

Council recommends the ACT Government develop a cross-directorate approach to regional and town planning to ensure that schools can begin planning for increases to school capacity, and to allow land for new schools to be set aside.

Recommendation 5

Council suggests the ACT Government signal the importance of specialist school facilities by excluding these spaces from public school capacity calculations.

Infrastructure projects and maintenance and hazardous materials in schools

Many of our schools are showing their age and upgrades are needed. Our schools must be accessible, safe and sound and provide all the facilities that students need to learn in a variety of domains. [Council's submission](#) to the current ACT Legislative Assembly standing committee inquiry into school infrastructure, maintenance and hazardous materials highlights a number of significant concerns raised by P&Cs about their school infrastructure.

P&Cs, parents and carers want to know that there is a fair and equitable system for the allocation of major infrastructure projects across all ACT public schools. Council is particularly concerned that specialist facilities in some high schools have been left in original condition and are greatly in need of modernisation.

Recommendation 6

Council strongly recommends the ACT Government ensure a consistent process is developed and implemented to ensure Education Directorate funded infrastructure projects are equitably distributed across ACT public schools.

Recommendation 7

Council recommends the ACT Government establish an equitable school modernisation fund to create inspiring places which students are proud to belong to, where schools which have not previously benefited can be prioritised.

Recommendation 8

Council strongly recommends the ACT Government significantly increase long-term funding for the management and removal of hazardous materials in ACT public schools.

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Council strongly recommends the ACT Government fund qualified infrastructure professionals to support schools with the management of school infrastructure and maintenance.

Recommendation 10

Council calls on the ACT Government to fund all of our recommendations to the ACT school infrastructure inquiry.

School security – CCTV and other measures

School communities want their schools to be safe places, valued and supported by the whole community. Unfortunately, some public schools in the ACT are subject to repeated vandalism, which costs the school financially and destroys the morale of the school community. Some school communities have had 12-13 major incidents of vandalism within a very short period of time, despite having been fenced. These communities are asking for assistance from the ACT Government to ensure that their public school is recognised as a valuable space and protected accordingly.

Feedback from school communities indicates that parents and carers are frustrated that public school grounds and facilities appear less important than private school grounds. Private schools can fence their grounds without undertaking extensive public consultation, where public consultations can stop public schools from installing fencing irrespective of the associated risks. Council believes that public school grounds and facilities are valuable to the community and worthy of protection.

Recommendation 11

Council recommends the ACT Government develop a strategy to protect schools from vandalism, including CCTV and fencing (where CCTV and fencing is supported by the school community).

Students at the centre

Students need the right supports at the right time to engage in learning and achieve their full potential. Council contends that supporting students will lead to excellence in education.

Accessible wellbeing and allied health supports in schools and the community

Despite significant commitments and investment by the ACT Government in wellbeing supports for students in public schools, students and their families are needing more support. Council is concerned a shortage of wellbeing and allied health supports publicly and privately available in the Canberra community will increase demand on the wellbeing and allied health supports available in schools.

Since 2020, families are reporting an increased shortage of wellbeing and allied health supports within the broader Canberra community. Families have reported a high turnover in qualified staff, in addition to very long waiting lists of 12 months across a range of public and private services, including speech pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists and psychiatrists. Many families have waited long periods for diagnostic assessments, followed by further long wait lists for therapeutic supports. Council contends that provision of early and real time access to supports for students is desperately needed for parents and carers and schools. Council recognises that waiting for services often results in increasing challenging behaviours at home and at school, and often

requires additional school resources. Council believes the inability to access these wellbeing and allied health supports is likely to increase demand for supports in public schools. Additionally, Council expects that an inability to access wellbeing and allied health supports for diagnostic assessment or therapy is likely to impact student behaviour, resulting in increased incidents, as well as escalation of incidents in public schools. Alternatively, early identification and access to wellbeing and allied health supports will prevent a large portion of challenging behaviours in schools.

Recommendation 12

Council strongly recommends the ACT Government increase real-time and accessible wellbeing and allied health supports available through public schools, to support student learning.

Recommendation 13

Council strongly encourages the ACT Government implement a plan to attract and retain public and private wellbeing and allied health services in the Canberra community.

Relationships and sex education

Currently, the Australian Curriculum requires relationships and sex education be delivered in specific school years. In the ACT, public schools may fulfil this requirement in a number of ways, including procuring specialist services to provide incursions or by teachers developing their own content. However, research clearly demonstrates a more comprehensive consistent approach to relationships and sex education is needed.¹ Implementing a comprehensive evidenced-based relationships and sex education framework in schools promotes wellbeing, self-management, healthy relationships, reduces sexualised violence and protects against negative sexual experiences.²

Recommendation 14

Council calls on the ACT Government to fund and embed a comprehensive evidenced-based relationships and sex education framework in public schools that:

- meets the needs of all students, including those with special education needs and disabilities,
- engages parents and carers early,
- explicitly teaches protective behaviours including body autonomy and consent consistently from preschool,
- is delivered by educators with specialist training,
- is accurate and age appropriate, be positively role-modelled in everyday school life,
- is embedded in expectations for school communities,
- is supported by all school staff,
- is integrated into school life rather than only taught in specific school years,
- is evaluated against accountability mechanisms.

¹ Marson, K. (2018) *Ignorance is not innocence: Safeguarding Sexual Wellbeing Through Relationships and Sex Education*. <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/katrina-marson-act-2018/>

² Ibid.

Inclusive education for every student

Students of all capabilities and backgrounds must be provided with adequate support so they can achieve their best. Council considers, a targeted approach is needed to ensure all public schools support every students' learning needs, including those with learning difficulties and the gifted and talented students.

Students with disabilities or complex needs

Whilst some ACT schools work hard to provide best practice inclusive educational experiences for all students, a number of parents and carers are extremely frustrated by a general lack of inclusive education practice across public schools. In these instances, parents and carers report that they or their students don't feel welcome, a sense of belonging within their public school community or valued.

Reports to Council indicate that students with disabilities in some schools are not supported to engage in whole of school activities and events. In other cases, parents and carers are required to repeatedly advocate for reasonable adjustments to be made to support learning. Other experiences include staff questioning medical diagnoses, delay in making or declining to make reasonable adjustments (via Individual Learning Plans and Behaviour Plans). In other cases, it appears that schools have regularly failed to implement reasonable adjustments or failed to implement reasonable adjustments with fidelity. Either of which may escalate student behaviour and result in occupational violence.

Parents and carers of students with disabilities or complex needs want public schools to lead best-practices when it comes to inclusive education. Whilst individual schools may offer a different approach to inclusive education, parents expect the foundations of inclusive education practice to be consistent across the system. To achieve this, Council considers inclusive education needs to be underpinned by a wholistic framework, which clearly identifies expectations and outcomes. Parents and carers want to know what inclusive education might look like. Council expects students with disability or complex needs to be welcomed and supported to engage in learning, irrespective of the school they attend.

Furthermore, parents and carers of students with disabilities and complex needs are often required to complete additional administrative tasks and advocacy to ensure their students have access to appropriate supports. In many cases, parents and carers are exhausted by the amount of time spent advocating for student needs to be met. One example is the requirement to complete two enrolment application forms to access a learning support unit: one for their local school and then one for a learning support placement. Council understands that these parents and carers are often already under significant pressures due to their students' additional needs. A reduction in the administrative and advocacy burden for these parents and carers would be greatly appreciated.

Our schools need physical infrastructure, which is safe and sound and, supports access for students to engage in their learning, from ramps and lifts to sensory spaces, as well as quiet and calm spaces. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that some students, such as those with social disabilities, health conditions or immune-compromised, greatly benefit from continued access to remote and online learning. Offering remote and online learning within existing school communities reduces social pressures whilst allowing students to remain connected with their teachers and

peers. Supporting students to maintain social connections is an important aspect of inclusive school communities.

Recommendation 15

Council suggests the ACT Government ensure the approach to individualised learning in public schools is implemented, to ensure that all students reach their full potential. Especially students with learning difficulties, gifted and talented students and those with disabilities and complex needs.

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Council calls on the ACT Government to fund the development of a wholistic inclusive education framework to guide best practice inclusive education across public schools.

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Recommendation 20

Council calls on the ACT Government to extend the commitment to offer remote and online learning at every public school for students who need it or are unable to attend.

Quality teaching

Qualified teacher librarians

Council acknowledges the ACT Government's commitment to provide scholarships to increase the number of teacher librarians in ACT schools. Council strongly believes every school must have a permanent, fully resourced library which is staffed by qualified teacher librarians.

Council considers that many students will need additional assistance to recover from lost learning due to COVID-19 shutdowns, and to grow student literacy. Professionally staffed libraries are the perfect place to support student literacy, learning and help students make sense of modern information sources. Only 2 in 5 public schools has a properly staffed library, with some schools having lost their permanent library space due to enrolment growth.

Recommendation 21

Council calls on the ACT Government to ear-mark funding for qualified teacher librarian in every school. Placement of librarians in schools with lower socio-economic areas should be prioritised.

Safe and responsive schools

Communities must have confidence that schools, students and staff are safe from violence and respond well when incidents occur.

Violence is an unfortunate feature of our community, so schools are impacted. This means we need good strategies to reduce the incidence of violence, and to better respond when it happens.

Recommendation 22

Council calls for the full and unconditional implementation of all recommendation by the [ACT Government Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools](#). Including a trustworthy and resolution-focused complaints handling process at the directorate and school levels, with a self-reporting portal for students and families to report incidents.

Recommendation 23

Council recommends the ACT Government continue to support a range of strategies to reduce bullying and violence in schools including, implementing the Smiling Minds mindfulness program, MIEACT's No Labels program and Menslink.

Strong communities

Communities scaffold around schools to support students to assist them reach their potential. Council is appreciative of the parental engagement grants which have resulted in a number of exciting and novel ways to improve relationships between schools and parents. However, Council considers that broader Government approaches and policies must acknowledge the central and special place schools have in the Canberra community. P&C Associations are small volunteer organisation which form a crucial component of school communities, by providing connections to networks and relationships through events and activities, essential school services (such as canteens and out of hours school care) and raising funds. Council contends that a lack of volunteers and increasing regulatory obligations may result in P&Cs being unable to continue to make positive contributions to school communities.

Recommendation 24

Council strongly recommends the ACT Government continue to find ways to support school communities connect, by considering the impact of policies and decisions on P&Cs.