



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMY AND GENDER AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY  
Mr James Milligan MLA (Chair), Ms Suzanne Orr MLA (Deputy Chair),  
Ms Laura Nuttall MLA

# **Submission Cover sheet**

## **Inquiry into Unpaid Work**

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# Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality - Inquiry into unpaid work

29 May 2024



**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.*

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

## 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.

Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry into unpaid work. As the peak body representing volunteer run parent and citizens' associations, Council provides important insight into the economic and wellbeing impacts of unpaid work through volunteering. The work of Council is also overseen by a volunteer Executive Committee. Council notes that volunteering differs from other unpaid work such as unpaid caring work and parental and familial work as people that volunteer make a deliberate choice to do so.

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

## Background

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations has key functions in both representing the parent voice to government and as the peak body supporting around 90 parent and citizens associations. Council employs five part-time employees who staff the Council office and provide member assistance. They support and are directed by a volunteer Executive Committee.

P&C Associations are an important part of school communities and run canteens, uniform shops and out of school care services. Parents can provide a valuable resource in many ways across the school such as helping in the classroom, volunteering in the canteen or being involved in P&C activities.

In 2017 Council surveyed parents to better understand motivations and obstacles to volunteering. The survey was broadly distributed across the school network and received responses from over 550 participants. To ensure up to date information, Council undertook a follow-up survey in April and May 2024 to check current attitudes. Our follow-up survey was sent through our communication channels with P&Cs and received nearly 30 responses. Analysis of the results showed that parents' views on volunteering remained consistent in both surveys.

## Discussion

Parents and citizens associations are volunteer-run organisations that exist to support the school and community. They're the focal point for parent participation in the school community and often fundraise for many "extras" such as, playground upgrades, sports equipment and kitchen gardens, that go beyond what is provided by the education directorate. They are as unique and individual as each school community. Some are focused on fundraising for big school projects, others are more about building school community through fun events, such as school discos or colour runs. Many will do a combination of both. They provide an environment for parents and carers to be more involved in their child's school and engage with school leadership staff. Many P&Cs also provide valuable services to the school such as canteens, uniform shops and outside school hours care services. These services, whilst managed by volunteer committees, often employ paid workers. These employees are often sourced from within the school community, building capacity amongst the community and giving parents a foot back into the workforce after time away raising children.

The volunteers of P&C associations are predominantly women and are balancing volunteering with looking after children and working. Of our member organisations roughly 80 per cent of committee members are women. This percentage is reflected in Council's own Executive Committee which also consists of roughly 80 per cent women. Given the traditional role of women in raising children, this figure is not surprising. However, whilst most women have continued to take primary responsibility for child raising, they are often also juggling this with paid work responsibilities.

The impact of other commitments on volunteering is seen in our survey responses with nearly half of survey respondents indicating that they would like to volunteer more often (48%). About 44% indicated they would like to volunteer the same as they currently do and only 8% indicated they would like to volunteer less often. When asked what has prevented respondents from volunteering at their child's school the two biggest reasons were family commitments (61%) and work commitments (46%) (multiple responses were allowed). This shows a desire amongst the respondents to contribute more to unpaid volunteering roles, however they are constrained by other commitments, including other unpaid work.

More than half of our survey respondents also volunteer in another capacity outside of school (similar percentage to the results in 2017). A diverse range of volunteering was noted such as some related to their child's activities, such as with sporting teams or scouts and others such as with the RSPCA, the SES and at Ronald Macdonald House. Interestingly in both our 2017 and 2024 surveys, the main response people listed as their reason for volunteering was simply "I wanted to help".

Time for parents is a precious commodity. A 2024 survey of over 8000 parents, undertaken by The Triple P Positive Parenting Program found that "almost half of all parents are dissatisfied with the amount of time that they spend on self-care activities, such as physical exercise, socialising or doing an activity they enjoy. Nearly two thirds of parents experience feelings of

guilt at least once a week related to the time they spend with their child.” (<https://www.tripleparenting.net.au/au/articles-and-news/post/8000-parents-speak-out-in-biggest-parenting-pulse-check-revealing-rising-stress-emotional-distress-and-exhaustion/>)

In recent years P&Cs have found it increasingly difficult to attract volunteers in order to fill committee positions or to run events. Work commitments and a lack of time generally have made it more difficult for parents to be involved in their children’s school. P&Cs have had to be creative about how they operate and the events they run but even still struggle to find volunteers. Given the importance of parent engagement in schools for student outcomes we believe that a strategy to boost volunteers in schools should be developed. This strategy should encompass both parent volunteers through P&Cs and direct to school and highlight the benefits of volunteering for individuals and the communities they serve.

**Economic and wellbeing of unpaid work**

There are both positive economic and wellbeing outcomes for parents and carers volunteering in schools. In our survey, we asked parents what it would be like if parents didn’t volunteer in schools. The responses clearly showed both the wellbeing and economic value placed on the volunteering that happens in school communities and highlighted the role unpaid work plays in raising much needed funding for school resources and in building community spirit.

A selection of responses are below (2024 survey in grey and 2017 survey in blue) :

<b>Complete this sentence: If parents didn’t volunteer in schools.....</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>then school communities will disappear and schools will miss out on funding opportunities that the government doesn't provide.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>there would be a lack of alignment between home and school, many missed opportunities, and an underfunded system struggling under a massive workload.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a loss of community spirit would occur, which would be detrimental to the school community.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I think there would be very limited opportunity to build community and get to know other families.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the school would miss out on extra, much needed funds.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>then the children miss out and there is no school spirit or sense of community.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>parent voice wouldn't be heard. School improvement would be hindered by lack of funding for the extras which allow a better education for my children.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>loss of money raised, loss of school community and support for teachers and principal.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the 'sense' of community will decrease and all those incidental opportunities you get as a volunteer to meet new people would decrease too. The school capacity to deliver excellent education would diminish.</li> </ul>

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• children would miss out on valuable, life enriching experiences like Artists' and Writers' festivals, Read Alongs, sports, cross country and swimming carnivals. Good for children to see parents involved and modeling volunteer work in community.</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• there would be no after school care business, canteen or uniform shop, less money donated to school, less sense of community.</li> </ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school would lose its strong sense of community, resources would be scarcer, and the students would miss out on some events (eg: Discos, movie nights) that enrich their schooling lives.</li> </ul>  |

Volunteering undertaken by parents and carers is seen as being a vital component of building a sense of community in schools. Many respondents indicated that by volunteering in schools, parents and carers played an important role in organising events that brought the school community together. In addition to special events organised by P&Cs, just being involved in the school, through activities such as reading with students or helping out at sporting events was seen as important ways to feel a part of the school community. This sense of community is important in contributing to parent wellbeing.

For many P&Cs raising money for the school is high on their agenda. The economic contribution of P&Cs is clearly visible in the fundraising dollars they generate, which is in turn used to purchase goods and services for school communities. However, it can be hard to put an economic value on the totality of work that P&Cs do. The fundraising dollars are easy enough to count but the contribution is greater than that. P&Cs provide some parents with a step back into the workforce, through both volunteer and paid roles, with flexibility and support around other commitments. Parent volunteers helping children with their reading can have long term economic benefits for those children. P&Cs also play an important role in applying for grants, which if successful the funding gets spent locally to acquire goods and services.

### **P&Cs as service providers and employers**

Many P&C associations provide valuable services to school communities such as canteens, uniform shops and outside hours care services. These services benefit the school community in various ways and operate using both volunteer and paid staff.

As employers P&C associations can provide a valuable pathway for parents within the school community to return to the workforce in an environment and hours that fit in with their unpaid parental work.

P&C associations are the largest provider of public-school canteens in the ACT with about 30 services in our schools. This requires a great investment by P&C committee members who are all volunteers juggling their commitments including paid work and parenting; to provide their community with a quality service. For P&Cs this involves a lot of complexity from having oversight of paid staff, keeping up with employment obligations, food safety rules, the traffic light system of healthy foods and of course ensuring the facilities are adequate.

Canteens are important to school communities. They provide healthy food options and support students to make good food choices. They also give parents a day off making lunch and enable students to learn about using money. Whilst school canteens have traditionally been run by P&Cs, over recent years the number of P&C run school canteens has been declining. Some of them have been replaced by other providers and some have closed altogether. The increasing regulatory requirements have had an impact on the ability of canteens to operate. It is becoming more and more difficult for volunteer committees, who are juggling multiple responsibilities, including paid work and family commitments, to have the time or knowledge to keep canteens open, despite the desire of school communities.

### **Case study – P&C run uniform shop**

One P&C of a large P-10 school runs a uniform shop which is operated by volunteers, with the assistance of one paid staff member. The shop is open for half an hour most days with different volunteers rostered on each day. Volunteers are parents from the community and the school uniform shop provides them with an opportunity to contribute to the school community in a way that works for them. Volunteers obtain skills relevant to the workplace, such as opening the shop, tidying and replacing stock on the floor and sorting and washing secondhand uniforms. The paid staff member is also a parent from the school community. This role has provided that parent with the opportunity to undertake casual work that fits around parental responsibilities. There is also an economic benefit to the school community of having a primarily volunteer-run uniform shop as they are able to keep costs down. At the end of each term the P&C thanks the volunteers by treating them to a coffee. This allows the volunteers to get together and builds social capital among like-minded parents.



### **Challenges faced by volunteers**

The economic and wellbeing contribution of P&Cs is significant for both school communities and volunteers, however, they are not without challenges. The complexities required of volunteer organisations, in respect of governance and legal requirements, (which are only increased if the P&C employs staff or run a canteen) mean that some P&Cs are having to make hard decisions to wind up or to stop running services. As such vital organisations to school communities, it is important that governments look at what they can to support volunteer organisations and the people that keep them running.

Council and the P&Cs we represent are all incorporated associations and are subject to the regulatory requirements as outlined in the *Association Incorporation Act 1991*. Access Canberra has responsibility for ensuring compliance with the Act. Council's experience and that of members suggests that Access Canberra could support associations better by being more proactive in helping associations meet their obligations instead of taking a punitive approach to compliance. Another simple suggestion to be more user friendly is for Access Canberra to move to an online system of reporting information and use email as the primary way to communicate

with public officers. For time-poor volunteers being able to fulfil their obligations online at a time that suits them is preferable than having to lodge documents face to face during office hours.

In addition, many of our members are also registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for profits Commission (ACNC). For the most part there is no duplication between the reporting required to the two entities, however, for new Committee members just understanding the governance and reporting requirements can be a challenge. The nature of P&Cs means that there is a regular turnover of committee members. Members come and go as their children progress through the school system. It's rare to find the same people on P&C committees for longer than 3 years. Many new committee members join the P&C as a way to be involved in their children's school but don't understand the regulatory framework they must operate under.

It is also getting harder and harder for P&Cs to attract volunteers. Paid work combined with family commitments mean that for many would be volunteers there just isn't enough time in the day. This impacts on P&Cs ability to run fundraising and social events for school communities. Workplace volunteering programs should recognise that volunteering is an important part of people's lives and the contribution it can make to wellbeing and the building of social capital in the community. Whilst one day of volunteer leave, which is in some enterprise agreements, is better than nothing, it doesn't recognise the sustained time pressures of volunteering. Many volunteers don't just volunteer one day a year but do smaller amounts on a regular basis. Having some of that time recognised by their employers has the potential to have a big impact on the time pressures volunteers face.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1**

The ACT Government should develop a strategy to boost parent volunteer numbers in schools, which includes raising the profile of volunteering and the benefits it brings.

### **Recommendation 2**

Access Canberra should become more user friendly and move to an online system to help volunteer organisations, such as P&Cs meet their regulatory obligations.

### **Recommendation 3**

Governments should consider the impact of policies on small volunteer run incorporated associations. Often regulations are made with businesses in mind that are also applied to small volunteer run incorporated associations.

### **Recommendation 4**

ACT Government enterprise agreements should contain provisions allowing employees, more regular, smaller blocks of time for volunteering in recognition of the ongoing and sustained volunteer work undertaken by many volunteers and the benefits that this has on the broader community.