

March 29, 2023

ASPA submission to The Standing Committee on Education and Community & Inclusion Inquiry on the future of ACT school infrastructure

The purpose of this submission is to highlight the importance of student learning and well-being as the driving force behind the design, construction, and maintenance of school infrastructure. The Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion has an opportunity to shape the future of ACT school infrastructure, ensuring that decisions prioritise student outcomes, staff retention, and the health and wellbeing of school leaders. This submission focuses on the following key areas:

1. **Access to Safe and Healthy Schools:** Appropriate site selection, context in broader community, and prioritisation of school infrastructure as a social good are crucial factors in ensuring access to safe and healthy schools. Older schools in the ACT with ageing infrastructure and hazardous materials such as lead, and asbestos require urgent attention. Additionally, older school playgrounds need upgrading, and recreation, learning, and linking spaces should have good visibility to ensure student safety.
2. **Age-Appropriate Learning and Recreation Spaces:** Age-appropriate learning and recreation spaces are critical for student well-being. Secondary and senior primary students require appropriate seating and grassed and naturally shaded areas. Some ACT school ovals may not be safe or fit for purpose under current policy and regulatory frameworks, and consideration needs to be given to all-weather recreation spaces to ensure that students have appropriate spaces to spend their break times, indoors and outdoors. These should not be constrained to gyms and other sporting facilities. Secondary students also need internal social spaces when it is cold, wet, or too hot outside, or where they may undertake less physically active activities.
3. **Consideration of the External Environment:** Climate awareness is an essential consideration for school infrastructure in the ACT. Schools require appropriate climate control systems that cope with extreme temperatures, and effective energy-efficient design, upgrade and technologies should be implemented across all schools. This would allow schools to showcase ACT Government Energy Efficiency measures.
4. **Learning Interactions Between Teachers, Spaces and Pedagogy:** Spaces for specialised subjects need to be on a roster of upgrades to remain at current standards. Modern teaching spaces need to be designed for collaboration, differentiation, and competency-based inquiry within a supportive learning environment. Schools require spaces that are flexible for larger and smaller groups, adaptable to different activities, and provide greater collaborative opportunities and flexible student support options. Visibility between classrooms, in corridors and flexible cultural spaces is also vital.
5. **Cross-cultural impact:** Consideration should be given to capacity for new and existing schools to integrate cultural spaces such as prayer rooms, Indigenous yarning circles and outdoor learning areas, maintaining the principle of flexibility so that spaces can be adapted and responsive for the variety of pedagogical approaches used in schools.
6. **Context for students from varying income backgrounds:** When designing meeting rooms and spaces it should be noted that these spaces may also be accessed and used on occasion by external organisations

and allied health professionals to support students and families. There should also be consideration for provision of bathrooms, laundry, kitchen facilities to support students who may need extra care at school.

7. **Optimal School Size:** Schools should have the capacity to provide safe and supportive environments for students and staff while promoting positive learning outcomes, culture, and workload management. The optimal school population size for the best student learning outcomes may vary depending on the context and specific characteristics of the school. However, research suggests that smaller schools may be associated with better academic outcomes for students and offer benefits in terms of student engagement and teacher collaboration. We recommend consideration should be given to specific, lower limits to school capacity based on this evidence and research.

School halls should have the capacity for the whole school population to be in one space for an assembly or ceremony, and schools should be subsidised to access external sites for graduations, particularly those with large graduating cohorts i.e., Colleges.

8. **Synergies with the wider community:** It is important to be mindful of the impact on school administrative staff if the expectation is that schools will manage community use. If schools are expected to take on additional responsibilities related to community use, there may need to be additional resources and support provided to ensure that the workload is manageable.

In terms of infrastructure, it is important to strike a balance between functionality and aesthetics. While it is important to ensure that schools are modern and inviting places for students and the community, this should not come at the expense of safety and practicality. Car parks, traffic flow, pedestrian safety, and street appeal are all important considerations when designing school infrastructure. However, it is important to prioritise the needs of students and staff over the desires of the wider community when making decisions about school infrastructure.

9. **Long-term planning and demographic change:** We suggest avoiding selling schools off, even if their populations decline, and instead close or repurpose them while retaining ownership to ensure that the government can respond to future population fluctuations. This approach could help to mitigate the risks to student learning outcomes and staff wellbeing, as well as minimise the substantial costs of establishing new schools. By adopting a proactive and forward-thinking approach to school infrastructure, the ACT Government can help to ensure that students and staff have access to high-quality educational facilities, regardless of changes in population demographics.

This submission emphasises that the design, construction, and maintenance of school infrastructure in the ACT should prioritise student outcomes, staff retention, and the health and wellbeing of school leaders. This can be achieved by ensuring access to safe and healthy schools configured for engaging and collaborative learning; age-appropriate learning and recreation spaces; fit-for-purpose climate control infrastructure; best practice in learning interactions between teachers, spaces, and pedagogy; consideration of school capacity to manage community use; and underpinned by a long-term plan for sustainability and efficiency. The Standing Committee on Education and Community has an opportunity to shape the future of ACT school infrastructure to ensure that it meets the needs of all students, staff, and the broader community for years to come.