



ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

The parent voice on public education

Mr Andrew Barr
Chief Minister & Treasurer
ACT Budget Consultation

18 March 2024

Dear Andrew,

On behalf of the ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council), I am writing to provide a submission to the 2024-25 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 affiliates and make representations to government on behalf of parents of government 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,

Liane Joubert
President
ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

Budget Submission 2024 - 25



**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.

ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations | ABN: 53 870 517 949
Grant Cameron Community Centre, 17/27 Mulley Street, HOLDER
Tel: 02 6241 5759 | **Email:** contact@actparents.org.au | **Web:** www.actparents.org.au

Executive Summary

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations is pleased to provide the following submission for consideration in the ACT government's 2024-25 budget. Our submission includes 17 recommendations under four broad categories:

- Parent engagement and support for P&Cs;
- Support for students;
- An equitable public school system; and
- School infrastructure and maintenance.

In November 2023, Council conducted a survey to find out what were the key issues that parents of public school students wanted addressed. In total we received over 150 responses from parents from at least 25 different schools. The results of the survey, discussions at our general meetings and the general business of Council have informed this submission.

It is clear that parents expect schools to have high expectations for all students and that support should be provided to enable all students to reach their potential. They also expect infrastructure to provide inviting learning spaces and meet basic needs, such as clean and operational bathrooms. Equity across the system is also important as the high variance in school offerings seems to provide a public education system divided by post-code.

The partnership between a school and their P&C Association is pivotal in supporting the wellbeing of families and communities in Canberra. Council recommends the ACT Government supports and increases budgetary initiatives to provide all students at public schools with an excellent education experience, as well as nurturing the relationship schools have with their P&C Association.

Council notes that schools and their P&C Associations all over Canberra contribute directly to multiple domains in the Wellbeing Framework, as well as introduce students to most domains. Schools are some of the first places that Canberrans develop wellbeing in the domains of:

- Education and life-long learning,
- Identity and belonging
- Health,
- Safety,
- Social connection, and
- Time.



Recommendations

Parent engagement and support for P&Cs

Recommendation 1

Council recommends that the ACT Government develop a policy or guiding framework on parent engagement which contains clearly defined expectations for teachers and schools and explicitly encourages schools to collaborate with and support P&Cs. As part of this process EDU should undertake a review of the Volunteers and Visitors in Schools policy with a view to improving clarity of requirements and reducing administrative burden.

Recommendation 2

The ACT Government should develop a strategy to boost parent volunteer numbers in schools.

Recommendation 3

The ACT Government should extend grant opportunities available to school communities through their P&C Associations, including Parent Engagement Grants, with goals of building community capacity and engagement.

Recommendation 4

The ACT Government should provide an additional \$75,000 ongoing funding to Council to employ an experienced community case manager/facilitator to specifically support P&Cs, with a focus on new P&Cs, those at risk of winding up and those requiring complex case management.

Support for students

Recommendation 5

The ACT Government should continue to focus on inclusion to all ensure that all students receive appropriate support so that they are able access public education on the same basis as their peers.

Recommendation 6

The ACT Government commit to and provide funding for the implementation of a consistent evidence-based approach to improving literacy and numeracy outcomes to ensure that all students can be proficient in these key foundational skills.

Recommendation 7

Appropriate resourcing should be allocated to ensure that schools have the systems in place for all students to achieve their potential, including gifted and talented programs, reasonable adjustments and high expectations for all learners.

Recommendation 8

Funding should be provided to bring more allied health practitioners into schools and to provide mental health and wellbeing supports.

An equitable public school system

Recommendation 9

At a system level ensure that all schools are supported to be fully staffed (or where this is not possible that staffing shortages are spread more evenly across the system) so that all schools can provide a high-quality educational experience for all students.

Recommendation 10

That the ACT Government provide incentives for experienced teachers and school leadership staff to take up positions at schools in greater need to ensure that there is a balanced spread of experience at all schools.

Recommendation 11

That all schools are supported centrally to employ teacher librarians and language teachers to ensure that all ACT public school students can benefit from these important resources.

Recommendation 12

That the system support more consistent offerings across schools to enable more schools to offer specialist programs (such as, but not limited to, academic, sport, music or art programs) so that such programs are not concentrated in schools in areas of higher advantage or that opportunities be provided to students to access such programs based on identified need, regardless of their PEA.

School infrastructure and maintenance**Recommendation 13**

An equitable and transparent school modernisation fund should be established to ensure a system for all schools to be upgraded according to need, in order to provide inspiring places which students are proud to belong to.

Recommendation 14

Additional funding be allocated to ensure that ACT public school bathrooms are well maintained, clean and accessible.

Recommendation 15

Invest in accessibility upgrades across ACT public schools as a matter of priority with the goal of having all public schools accessible by 2030. These upgrades should include ramps, lifts, accessible toilets, sensory spaces, quiet and calm spaces, assistive technology and modifications across schools to make the whole school site sensory friendly.

Recommendation 16

New schools to be built to match population growth and increases in urban density, including new primary schools in central Belconnen and Woden and a new college in Molonglo. As well as innovative solutions to addressing capacity issues in high density areas such as a vertical school in central Canberra.

Recommendation 17

That the ACT Government investigate and come up with a permanent and sustainable solution to reversing the decline in operational school canteens.

Parent engagement and support for P&Cs

Council recommends the ACT Government supports budgetary initiatives to promote and support the role that parents play in their children's education and in building the social capital of school communities. We want to see parents being explicitly welcomed into schools and partnerships between parents and schools valued and actively fostered. We want to see the role of Parent and Citizen Associations (P&Cs) valued and supported by schools and government, recognising the valuable contribution P&Cs make to school communities. We also want additional investment in Council to enable us to better support P&Cs experiencing challenges, especially those requiring complex case management.

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. Parent volunteers form a crucial part of the school community but finding volunteers has become increasingly difficult. Strategies need to be implemented to ensure that volunteers in schools are supported to continue to make a positive impact in school communities.

Parent engagement

Outcomes for children are the best when families, schools, communities and governments work together. Parents are important partners in schooling by virtue of their role as the central provider and carer, and the role they play in their children's learning and development.

Parent participation contributes significantly to better outcomes for all students. It enables the school system and individual schools to respond more effectively to community values, aspirations and needs. It enhances the strength and vibrancy of the public education system and builds a stronger school community. Council considers that quality parent engagement makes teaching easier for school staff, as they have greater understanding of the students in front of them.

Parent engagement can occur in many ways and for many parents the P&C is an important way for them to be involved with their children's school. When supported and working well P&Cs provide a significant positive contribution to school communities and play a role in building wellbeing amongst everyone in the school community, from parents to students to teachers and school executive and support staff.

Council would like to see the value of P&Cs included in a policy or guiding framework on parent engagement. This document should explicitly encourage schools to collaborate with and support P&Cs, noting the valuable contribution they make to the school community. As part of this work the Education Directorate (EDU) should undertake a review of the Volunteers and Visitors in Schools policy to improve clarity and reduce administrative burden. Council is aware that this policy is being interpreted differently across schools and in some cases is placing an excessive administrative burden on P&Cs. Council raised concerns about the lack of clarity in the policy when it was developed and requests a review of the policy to make the obligations of all parties clearer.

In recent years P&Cs have found it increasingly difficult to attract volunteers in order to fill committee positions or to run events. Work hours of parents 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.

Council would also like to see the re-introduction of “Parental Engagement Grants”. These grants gave P&C associations the freedom to explore creative ways to engage with their school communities. Being volunteer organisations who are often constrained to tight budgets, small and targeted financial support for P&Cs can pay large wellbeing dividends in the community.

Recommendation 1

Council recommends that the ACT Government develop a policy or guiding framework on parent engagement which contains clearly defined expectations for teachers and schools and explicitly encourages schools to collaborate with and support P&Cs. As part of this process EDU should undertake a review of the Volunteers and Visitors in Schools policy with a view to improving clarity of requirements and reducing administrative burden.

Recommendation 2

The ACT Government should develop a strategy to boost parent volunteer numbers in schools.

Recommendation 3

The ACT Government should extend grant opportunities available to school communities through their P&C Associations, including Parent Engagement Grants, with goals of building community capacity and engagement.

Support for P&C Associations

A key part of Council’s role is to support P&C Associations to help them run smoothly. 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&Cs and make representations to government on behalf of parents and carers across all ACT public schools. Council receives funding through an ACT government grant and member fees.

Over the last couple of years Council has seen an increased demand for our individual tailored member supports or complex case management. Whilst this support is greatly appreciated by our members it takes considerable staff time. Often these supports require several sessions of individual coaching, a consistent provision of advice, facilitation and or attendance at one or more P&C meetings. Although providing support for P&Cs is a core part of Council’s operations, the increase in demand for this service, particularly complex case management has meant that we have had to divert resources from other areas, resulting in Council having to prioritise opportunities to be involved in some education-related activities.

On a positive note, we have also seen a number of P&Cs start or re-establish following a period of non-operation. However, this also requires intensive staff resources in the form of advice and support. New P&Cs need support to establish appropriate governance documents and procedures, as well as financial support in their first year of operation to help with the costs of insurance and member fees.

Although Council has been able to absorb the increased demand for complex case management and support to date, it is not sustainable long term and will impact on our ability to provide other services, such as providing the parent perspective or “the parent voice” to government. In order to

address the rising number of complex cases Council needs to employ an experienced community case manager/facilitator (15 hours per week, during school terms). The role of this position would be to respond to complex cases, assist new P&Cs and those at risk of winding up and to develop capacity broadly across P&Cs to help them better navigate issues. This position would build on successful work already undertaken at Council to support P&Cs in their governance and relationship building capacity which has flow on benefits for all members of the school community.

Recommendation 4

The ACT Government should provide an additional \$75,000 ongoing funding to Council to employ an experienced community case manager/facilitator to specifically support P&Cs, with a focus on new P&Cs, those at risk of winding up and those requiring complex case management.

Support for Students

Inclusive schools

Council considers that considerable effort has been made to improve the experiences of students with disabilities in ACT public schools. Council welcomes the release of the *Inclusive Education: A Disability Inclusion Strategy for ACT Public Schools 2024-2034* and associated *First Action Plan 2024-2026* as well as the roll out of inclusion coaches in Tuggeranong schools. Council, notes that ongoing effort is required to improve the educational experience for students with disabilities and their families.

Council will be monitoring the rollout of the measures under the Action Plan with interest to see what impact they have on inclusive education. In particular we are keen to see the outcomes of inclusion coaches and whether they prove to be an effective way to build capacity in inclusive education in schools. We are also keen to see what extent cultural change can occur to ensure that all ACT public schools are welcoming and supportive places for all students.

In our 2023 survey parents have asked for:

“Improved supports for children with disabilities - an attitude change from senior leadership.”

“Genuine improvement on inclusion for neurodiverse children.”

“Better approach to inclusion and behaviour issues.”

“Improving inclusive education for students with disabilities.”

Recommendation 5

The ACT Government should continue to focus on inclusion to all ensure that all students receive appropriate support so that they are able access public education on the same basis as their peers.

Improved literacy and numeracy outcomes

Literacy and numeracy are foundational skills and parents consider good literacy and numeracy outcomes a key component of their children’s education. In Council’s recent survey the top two issues that parents wanted addressed were:

- Improved supports for students with learning difficulties and/or additional needs; and

- Improved literacy and numeracy outcomes for students.

Parents rightly expect that when they send their children to school, they will obtain the literacy and numeracy skills needed to be successful learners and to participate in society. Council has heard concerns from some parents that their children have not received the support necessary to develop their literacy and numeracy skills at school.

In terms of literacy and numeracy instruction, all ACT public schools are guided by frameworks set by the Education Directorate. However, Council understands that there is significant variability in the implementation of approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy across schools. Whilst Council appreciates that it is important that teachers are allowed to use their professional judgement to deliver programs flexibly based on their cohort of students there could be benefit in a more consistent approach that provides more structure and guidance than what is currently the case.

Council does not claim to be an expert in the approach that should be used but would be supportive of a consistent evidence-based approach to the teaching of literacy and numeracy, especially in the early years, that allows for some flexibility to respond to the individual needs of the students. Parents expect that their children will be taught using an evidence-based method that works for them. They want their child to learn to read and be functionally literate and for schools to be funded to deliver this. Council has lodged a submission to the independent inquiry into literacy and numeracy and eagerly awaits the findings. We hope that a more consistent approach across ACT public schools is one of the recommendations and that this is accompanied by appropriate funding to ensure its successful implementation.

Parent asks from our survey about literacy and numeracy outcomes include:

“That every child is supported appropriately to ensure they have the skills to read and write successfully.”

“That my child’s school provides proper intervention and support to children with learning difficulties/learning disabilities. That teachers have a better understanding of learning difficulties/learning disabilities and know how to support these children to ensure they finish primary school with competent reading, writing and spelling skills.”

“Evidence based literacy programs for every student including access to evidence-based intervention for all children who require it, not just the “bottom four”.”

Recommendation 6

The ACT Government commit to and provide funding for the implementation of a consistent evidence-based approach to improving literacy and numeracy outcomes to ensure that all students can be proficient in these key foundational skills.

High expectations and supports for all students

An important part of an education system is that all students are supported to reach their potential. Recent consultation indicates that parents are concerned that some schools are teaching to a minimum standard and do not do enough to challenge and extend all students, including gifted and talented students. Council believes that all ACT public schools should be focused on supporting all learners to reach their potential, not just the students that are struggling to learn the basics.

Council contends that any support systems that are implemented to support struggling learners should be accompanied by extension opportunities for gifted and talented students and all students should be supported and to achieve their best. Although ensuring that all students have the basic skills needed to fully participate in their education and life generally is important, it should be balanced with ensuring that all students, including gifted and talented and students with disabilities are supported to progress and develop.

Parent asks from our 2023 survey about support include:

“More time on numeracy and literacy in the school day for good students so they can excel - not just so everyone gets to a minimum standard.”

“Access to specialist programs, particularly gifted and talented. My daughter needs to be stretched academically and introduced to more challenging work.”

“A dedicated gifted and talented program. It is hugely lacking in the government school system and comes down to the individual principal and socioeconomic cohort of the school.

“Giftedness is not something that only occurs in privileged kids, but the only options for proper support are schools in exclusive PEAs or expensive private schools.”

Recommendation 7

Appropriate resourcing should be allocated to ensure that schools have the systems in place for all students to achieve their potential, including gifted and talented programs, reasonable adjustments and high expectations for all learners.

Improving access to specialist and allied health services

Council continues to advocate for greater access to specialist and allied health services both within schools but also more broadly across the ACT. Students need access to timely assessment, diagnosis, and treatment strategies for a range of health concerns. Providing pathways to diagnosis and treatment is important due to the funding and supports that often accompanies a diagnosis.

Public access to allied health practitioners is difficult. Psychologists, speech therapists and occupational therapists are in very high demand, with wait lists extending out as far as 6, 12, or even 24 months. If a child does not yet have a formal diagnosis which is covered financially by NDIS, the cost can be prohibitive. If a specialist practitioner is required (for example an OT with specific experience with autism), then wait times can be pushed out even further. This can lead to students not getting the help when they need it. Families and teachers are then left to work out by themselves the most appropriate strategies to use to assist those students in the school environment. By increasing access to psychologists and allied health specialists in ACT public schools students will be able to get the support they need earlier. If they are appropriately supported this will not only improve their outcomes but will also reduce workload on teachers.

Parents have asked for:

“Increased access to qualified psychologists for children during the school day.”

“Funding for students with additional needs, psychologists that have availability, speech pathologists, OT.”

“Dedicated allied health professionals internal to the school.”

“A speech pathologist and occupational therapist on staff at every public school. So that every child that needs support can access it.”

“It seems like the extreme cases of students facing socio economic challenges are taking resources away from other students with serious but less urgent problems. Eg unable to get school psychologist support. Are told to see classroom teachers who are not equipped.”

Recommendation 8

Funding should be provided to bring more allied health practitioners into schools and to provide more mental health and wellbeing supports.

An equitable public school system

The ACT public school system is based on school autonomy where individual schools determine the approach to learning, subject offerings and specialist programs. This includes the employment of specialist teachers, such as teacher librarians and language teachers. Whilst school autonomy allows each school to develop programs in response to their local community it has also resulted in a high variance of offerings across the ACT. It has also meant that some schools have had more difficulty than others in recruitment of staff and specialist teachers and that specialist programs are offered on an ad hoc basis across the ACT and are only available to students if they live in the PEA. It has also resulted in a lack of consistency and approach to the teaching of fundamental skills such as literacy and numeracy. Council believes that some of the issues could be addressed by taking a more systemic approach and that it may be appropriate to expect some degree of consistency in educational offerings across ACT public schools. Council notes that when an equity lens is applied it appears that schools in areas of higher advantage offer a broader range of specialist programs. Having a more systemic approach in some areas may help address some of the inequities across the ACT public education system.

Workforce

Council knows that with the current teaching workforce shortage and other factors impacting staff availability it is a challenge for schools to be fully staffed. However, we also understand that the workforce shortage impacts schools disproportionately across the ACT. Some schools are better able to attract and retain experienced teachers and relief teachers (due to location, reputation, school leadership, school community). As several respondents to our survey noted, some schools struggle to be fully staffed which makes it difficult for students to acquire important literacy and numeracy skills. One respondent also suggested that the schools that would benefit from more experienced staff are least likely to get them. If students do not get consistent access to a teacher their ability to acquire basic skills will be impacted.

Council feels that there is a role at a system level to support/encourage/incentivise more experienced staff to take up positions at schools with greater need. Council would like teachers that take up this opportunity to commit to a medium term to enable cultural change and provide mentorship of less experienced teachers. Short-term parachuting in of experienced staff is only a band aid solution. To enable long-term change the system needs to support a balanced spread of staff across all schools.

Some of the commitments that parents asked for in our 2023 survey in relation to workforce are:

“That my child would have a teacher each day. She has had months of being split due to teacher absence and no relief teachers. She is a keen student but has started not wanted to go to school because she knows she will be split and then when she’s split they do chromebooks or read or watch movies and don’t participate with the other class.”

“To attract expert teachers to XXXX, and other similar socio-economic demographic schools that need them most. Stop the passing around of highly experienced, lead teachers between schools with children who have the greatest advantage and attract these teachers into specialist roles at schools with more need.”

“Please get more teachers and relief teachers in school. I know absences can’t be avoided, but when the extended absence (in this case a needed surgery) is known of months in advance and still there is no replacement it starts impacting learning outcomes and increases the risk of school refusal.”

Recommendation 9

At a system level ensure that all schools are supported to be fully staffed (or where this is not possible that staffing shortages are spread more evenly across the system) so that all schools can provide a high-quality educational experience for all students.

Recommendation 10

That the ACT Government provide incentives for experienced teachers and school leadership staff to take up and remain in positions at schools in greater need to ensure that there is a balanced spread of experience at all schools.

Teacher librarians and language teachers

Council strongly believes that excellence in education requires qualified teacher librarians in every public school to promote student literacy and support teachers with resources across the curriculum. Council understands that qualified teacher librarians are generally found in public high schools and colleges, however, are not as common in public primary and early childhood schools. Anecdotal evidence suggests that schools with higher socio-educational advantage are more likely to have qualified teacher librarians compared with their counterparts. Council strongly believes that a student’s postcode should not determine the quality of education.

Council has lobbied for a number of years to get a teacher librarian in all public schools, but we know that this still hasn’t been achieved. Council calls on the ACT Government to recognise the positive impact that teacher librarians have on literacy outcomes and to commit to ensuring that all ACT public schools have a qualified teacher librarian.

Council also understands that despite being a compulsory part of the Australian Curriculum many ACT public school students are missing out on learning a second language at school. Council notes that workforce shortages meant that for some schools when their language teacher left, they were unable to find a replacement. However, there appears to be an uneven distribution in language teachers across the ACT with some areas impacted more than others. Tuggeranong students are the most likely to miss out on learning a second language at school. Council notes that some public schools are able to offer multiple languages (with one college offering up to nine different languages) whilst other schools can’t manage to secure one language teacher.

Again, Council contends that schools in areas of higher advantage are more likely to be able to attract and retain language teachers. Council questions how equitable it is for schools to be competing against each other for language teachers, when the result is that some schools are able to offer multiple language courses whereas other schools miss out altogether. Council calls on the ACT government to come up with a plan to ensure that all ACT public school students that should be learning a second language (as per the Australian Curriculum) are given this opportunity.

Recommendation 11

That all schools are supported centrally to employ teacher librarians and language teachers to ensure that all ACT public school students can benefit from these important resources.

Consistent offerings

Public schools can make their own decisions about the offerings they provide the school in terms of things such as specialist subjects, gifted and talented programs, music, arts or sports programs, language education and the staffing of specialist positions such as teacher librarians. For some schools this has enabled them to put in place a broad range of programs which are well regarded in the community. Other schools have, however, struggled to be able to resource and/or staff such programs and the school's offering is more basic. Whilst Council believes that there is some value in schools having flexibility to meet the needs of their community there is currently a high variance in the diversity of offerings at ACT public schools.

Having greater consistency in educational offerings, including the specialist programs on offer and approaches to literacy and numeracy also enables schools to maintain some consistency when there are changes in school leadership. Council has heard from parents that schools can change significantly when there is a change of leadership. Although it can be a positive thing to have a fresh set of eyes review existing programs and look for improvements, it can be disruptive to the school community when established and well-regarded programs and/or approaches to learning change on what appears to be the whim of a new leadership team.

We have heard concerns from parents about the inequitable access to specialist programs that some schools provide. Schools with higher ICSEA values seem to offer more specialist programs (such as academic, sport or band programs), music, arts and languages. These public schools appear to set a desirable standard, which is not matched by all schools. Parents that live outside of the PEA for schools with such programs have expressed frustration that their children don't have the same opportunities at their local public school. Council understands that it may not be appropriate or cost effective for all schools to offer every specialist program. It may be appropriate to support schools spread across the ACT to offer specialist programs, so that such programs aren't just concentrated in areas of greater advantage. It may then be appropriate to allow students from an area broader than the existing PEA to be able to apply to access specialist programs on offer at certain schools.

Parent asks (from our 2023 survey) in respect of school offerings include:

“Common / consistent curriculum and syllabus across public schools to reduce the postcode lottery about what students are taught.”

“Equal access to opportunities across public schools. Wealthy areas have disproportionately greater access to extra learning and facilities etc when they are the areas with the greatest capacity to meet those needs outside school. Lower SES areas need consistent access to

music, languages and art because the families there are the least likely to be able to provide those things. It cements inequality.”

Recommendation 12

That the system support more consistent offerings across schools to enable more schools to offer specialist programs (such as, but not limited to, academic, sport, music or art programs) so that such programs are not concentrated in schools in areas of higher advantage or that opportunities be provided to students to access such programs based on identified need, regardless of their PEA.

School infrastructure and maintenance

Infrastructure plays an important role in schools by providing welcoming, enriching environments where all students can access learning. At a minimum, P&Cs and their parents and carers want ACT public schools to be safe, accessible and comfortable places. However, they also expect all public schools to be inspiring, welcoming places, where students can shine.

Upgrades and refurbishments

Many ACT public schools are showing their age and upgrades are needed. Our schools must be accessible, safe and provide all the facilities that students need to learn in a variety of domains. P&Cs, parents and carers want to know that there is a fair and equitable system for the allocation of funding to refurbish ACT public schools.

Parents are concerned that older schools are not being updated as needed and that bathrooms are often neglected and not maintained as they should be. Council has heard from many P&Cs with concerns about the state of toilets at their children’s schools and that students avoid using bathrooms whilst at school because of this. Council has heard of students that have long standing medical conditions as a result of refusing to go to the toilet at school due to the unsatisfactory conditions.

As the ACT is growing, new schools are being built and opened. Although new schools are welcome to meet the growing demand, it also highlights the differences in built environment between new schools and existing schools. Whilst Council understands that all schools can’t be updated at the same time, we would like to see a transparent process for school upgrades and refurbishment. Such a process should be able to be done centrally with input from schools and scope for urgent upgrades due to health and safety reasons.

Appropriate well-maintained infrastructure is important to parents. In our recent survey “more funding for school maintenance and upkeep generally” was the third most important issue.

Some of the parent asks from our recent survey relating to infrastructure include:

“Additional funding for maintenance of the building and the grounds.”

“Maintenance. We have an older school and it’s deteriorating.”

“At the moment it would be upkeep and maintenance as our school has a number of maintenance issues which pose a safety risk and are a huge inconvenience to the school community.”

“More funding for infrastructure to create more suitable teaching and learning spaces and better support the current and future student population.”

“Better forward planning for modernisation and expansion of schools so that it’s not left to parents to push for investment once the problem is already manifesting. These schools need to be managed as assets.”

“Equitable approach to maintenance and refurbishment.”

“My children attend schools built in the 1960s and 70s and they look and feel old and run down. I would like to see them modernised more.”

“Schools in the ACT are aging significantly with insufficient funding for basic upkeep.”

Specific parent asks relating to student bathrooms include:

“Funding to upgrade the bathrooms.”

“Improvements to the school bathroom facilities, including more gender-neutral toilets. More maintenance of the bathrooms.”

“Better bathrooms. Little kids can’t operate the taps. There are out of date bubblers inside the bathrooms. They smell bad.”

Recommendation 13

An equitable and transparent school modernisation fund should be established to ensure a system for all schools to be upgraded according to need, in order to provide inspiring places which students are proud to belong to.

Recommendation 14

Additional funding be allocated to ensure that ACT public school bathrooms are well maintained, clean and accessible.

Schools are accessible for everyone

Parents want schools to be inclusive and to know that their young people will be welcomed and supported to engage in learning and school events no matter what school they attend. Council supports inclusive education, where every student is supported to access and engage with high quality learning and be an active participant in their school community. Appropriate infrastructure plays an important role in ensuring that students with disability can access school facilities and learning in the same way as other students.

Council acknowledges that accessibility is a particular issue for the ACT’s older public schools. Understandably, retrofitting older schools is costly, complicated by additional factors such as the presence of hazardous materials and may include the need for re-design. Council understands that schools with students requiring modifications to allow accessibility are prioritised. However, Council has heard that currently adjustments for physical disabilities can still take a long time to be met. In the meantime, students wait and are unable to access school as their peers do. Council believes that students shouldn’t have to wait for the school’s physical infrastructure to be upgraded and that all schools should be accessible to people with disabilities. As such Council contends that significant

funding should be provided to retrofit older schools to ensure all schools are accessible for all by 2030.

School accessibility infrastructure upgrades should also include the addition of sensory/quiet spaces and assistive technologies to ensure that all schools can provide an inclusive physical environment to support all students with disabilities. Consideration of the overall sensory environment across the entire school site also needs to be taken into account with lighting, colours of walls, soundproofing, flexibility in design and layout of classrooms all important accessibility considerations.

Council notes that making schools accessible not only benefits students with disability but benefits the broader school community including parents with prams, parents and carers with disability, staff with disability and students with temporary injuries. Council calls on the Government to commit to funding accessibility upgrades so that all students can access their local school and participate in school life from day one.

Recommendation 15

Investment in accessibility upgrades across ACT public schools as a matter of priority with the goal of having all public schools accessible by 2030. These upgrades should include ramps, lifts, accessible toilets, sensory spaces, quiet and calm spaces, assistive technology and modifications across schools to make the whole school site sensory friendly.

Respond to capacity pressures

Planning for new schools and increases to existing schools' capacity has been an ongoing concern for P&Cs, parents and families over recent years. Whilst Council is pleased to see new schools being built we remain concerned that the ACT Government's commitment to building new schools, and expanding others is too slow and places an unreasonable capacity pressure on existing schools. P&Cs, parents and carers continue to identify that capacity pressures at a number of schools are compromising the educational experience of students.

Increases to urban density arising from urban infill is seeing permanent increases in the demand for schooling across the ACT. The effect of permanent increases in capacity are best demonstrated by the enrolment data for schools in the Inner North, Belconnen and Woden many of which are at or above capacity. Council considers that demountable classrooms are only a temporary measure, to cater for temporary increases in student enrolments.

In the last decade, there has been a large increase in high density development within Belconnen and Woden town centres. Many of the surrounding primary schools are already at or near capacity. Council believes that by building new primary schools in these areas it will reduce pressure on already full schools as well as encouraging active travel and building social capital in communities.

Council has been concerned about school capacity in the inner north for some time. We continue to call on the ACT Government to purchase land close to the tram corridor and consider innovative solutions such as a vertical school close to and linked with existing open spaces.

Council welcomes the opening of Stage 2 of Evelyn Scott School in 2023 which now caters to preschool to year 10 students. Council however, notes that a college for the Molonglo Valley is still years away. College students from the Molonglo Valley currently have to travel to Canberra College in Woden, which is fast approaching capacity. Council calls on the ACT Government to build a new

college in Molonglo as a matter of priority to reflect population growth in the region and reduce capacity pressures on Canberra College.

Recommendation 16

New schools to be built to match population growth and increases in urban density, including new primary schools in central Belconnen and Woden and a new college in Molonglo. As well as innovative solutions to addressing capacity issues in high density areas such as a vertical school in central Canberra.

Support for canteens

School canteens provide a valuable service providing healthy food options for students, giving parents a day off making lunch and enabling students to learn about using money. School canteens have traditionally been run by school P&Cs. However, 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. Council is aware that there are more canteens at high risk of closing down in the coming months.

Council notes the motion on school canteens that passed in the Legislative Assembly on 30 August 2023. Council looks forward to engagement on this issue and the opportunity to discuss our ideas on what could be done to better support school canteens. What is clear is that Government intervention is needed to ensure that public school students in the ACT have access to school canteens.

Recommendation 17

That the ACT Government investigate and come up with a permanent and sustainable solution to reversing the decline in operational school canteens.