



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

19 December 2016

Dear Andrew,

On behalf of the ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council), I am writing to provide a submission to the 2017-2018 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,

John Haydon
President

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

ABN: 53 870 517 949 | 100 Maitland St, Hackett ACT
Tel: 02 62415759 | Email: contact@actparents.org.au | Web: www.actparents.org.au

Budget Submission 2017 - 18



**ACT Council of
Parents & Citizens
Associations**

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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 a non-profit, non-government representative organisation whose objective is to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliates and make representations to government on behalf of parents.

Education is inextricably linked to positive economic, social and cultural outcomes for individuals and the community in general. There also exists a strong correlation between education and health: low education attainment rates have been linked to poor health outcomes.

In general Council has been supportive of the government's focus on education and notes the record-high levels of funding committed to the education system in recent years. However, a number of indicators are pointing to a decline in absolute student performance and while the ACT remains competitive against other jurisdictions in Australia, this is only to be expected given the Territory's high socio-economic status and the lack of regional or rural areas. Flat-lining of student performance as seems to be the case in the ACT, is of very serious concern in a competitive globalised world.

This year our submission focusses on three areas: teaching and learning; school infrastructure and traffic; and volunteering in schools.

Council recommends to the Chief Minister that funding be allocated towards:

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Specialised teachers
- Teacher librarians
- School psychologists
- Supporting students
- Gifted & Talented Students
- Interpreters
- Community Liaison Officers

SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRAFFIC

- Ongoing refurbishment and renovation of schools
- School traffic safety measures
- Café style facilities

VOLUNTEERING IN SCHOOLS

- Volunteer outreach
- Backroom support

Teaching and Learning

Specialised Teachers

Council calls upon the government to direct funding towards the training, recruitment, utilisation and retention of specialised teachers in primary schools.

Anecdotal evidence has suggested that NAPLAN testing has slowly shifted the curriculum focus to literacy and numeracy. As a result, schools have been slowly cutting back on the number of specialist teachers in schools (especially those who teach music, drama, visual arts, physical education and dance). While literacy and numeracy are extremely important aspects of the curriculum, Council also sees other areas as crucial to a student's education. Indeed, there is also an argument to introduce specialist literacy, numeracy, science and humanities and social sciences teachers.

In addition, Council has received feedback from parents who are concerned that teachers with a curriculum specialisation are not remaining in the public school system. Private schools are able to offer specialist teachers a salary package that cannot be matched in the public system.

A study into the use of subject specialist teachers in the NSW education system found that there was widespread use and support of such teachers. However, the learning and teaching experiences in schools are not uniform. The study suggested that these gaps were not adequately managed at a higher policy level. Council would argue that the ACT faces a similar situation. For several years now, Council has advocated for the implementation of a specialist teachers policy, focusing on the training, recruitment, utilisation and retention of said teachers.

In addition to retention of specialised teachers, funding should be used to train existing teachers to specialise in curriculum areas that are lacking specialised teachers. Targeted funding needs to be provided to ensure that schools are well placed to change existing structures.

There is a need to review foreign language teaching as while children at primary school level are attending one class a week in a foreign language this seems to lead to no real functional capacity in the language. Some language teachers have expressed frustration that foreign language learning is de-emphasised by some school leaderships. Council would like to see an external review of the Territory's language programmes focusing on outcomes rather than inputs. Such a review will need to be funded.

Teacher Librarians

Council believes that adequate funding should be provided so that there is at least one qualified teacher-librarian in every ACT school.

In a society that is increasingly dependent on information technology, teacher-librarians are an important aspect of modern day education. Council believes that there should be at least one teacher-librarian in every ACT school. Currently this is not the case.

Funding should be provided for actual teaching positions and should also be directed towards the professional education of teacher-librarians.

School Psychologists

The commitment to 20 new school psychologists is welcome. Council wants funding for these professionals tied to student numbers.

Council welcomes the employment of 20 additional school psychologists to strengthen mental wellbeing support in our government schools. With a long term perspective, Council would ideally like to see funding for these professionals tied to student numbers. Over the next 20 years the ACT will see a massive increase in the number of students in our schools. So that mental health support does not lag behind, funding for additional psychologists should be automatically increased as student numbers increase.

Supporting Students

All students should receive adequate support regardless of their personal circumstances.

Council welcomes the review into the SCAN (Student Centred Appraisal of Needs) model and the ongoing work being put into the SRA (Student Resource Allocation). The current SCAN model is outdated and non-transparent process based on deficits. It is Council's belief that the additional resources invested by this model are not apparent or disclosed.

Council believes that these funding models should be designed independently from current funding restrictions. Any additional funding requirements should be met by the Government to allow for our students to achieve their best.

Gifted & Talented Students, Interpreters & Community Liaison Officers

Gifted & Talented programs in schools

School autonomy should not result in schools' gifted & talented programs being diluted as funds are redirected to other educational needs in the schools. Funding for purpose should be insisted upon in allocating school budgets to avoid misdirection of funding.

Interpreters

Interpreters should be available when needed by a school and should be provided from a central funding pool, accessible by school principals on a needs basis. They should not be a cost to the individual school budget, as this again may result in a lack of funds for the required purpose.

Community Liaison Officers

Community Liaison Officers in schools should be funded for those schools that have a high proportion of parents from indigenous, EALD or low socio economic families. The work of such officers may well result in reduced cost to the government in corrections, police, health, family support and other community services.

School Infrastructure and Traffic

Ongoing Maintenance and Refurbishment of Schools

Council calls upon the government to fund a system-wide projects consisting of small scale capital works projects in ACT schools.

Council cannot stress the importance of high quality school facilities. Council notes the recent ACT Government commitment of \$85 million in capital for upgrades to government schools over the next four years. It is our hope that this funding (and what it will be used for) will be clearly reflected in the budget statement.

There still exists a disparity between the facilities found at older schools compared to their refurbished/new counterparts.

The school environment plays an important role in a student's learning outcomes. Studies in the United States have shown that the condition of school facilities directly influences the educational outcomes of students. Schools with high quality infrastructure also promote positive teacher attitudes and improved student mood and focus. Conversely, poor and inadequate infrastructure, buildings and amenities have a negative impact on a student learning. If public schools have unattractive facilities this can drive parents to enrol their children in private schools. While Council acknowledges the historical role of private schools in Australia, it believes a strong public school system is vital for the well-being of the country.

As a side note, inadequate facilities also leave the government open to claims of negligence should any students or staff suffer injury as a result of poor maintenance or the worn-out state of school infrastructure. Additionally, if adequate funding is provided early in conjunction with a structured and transparent plan to provide high quality facilities, the cost of maintaining the infrastructure will be cheaper in the long run.

High quality facilities mean less on-going maintenance and provide a longer life-span.

Targeted funding should be delivered system-wide to undertake programs such as the following:

- upgrading existing classrooms or building new ones where necessary
- upgrade furnishings and equipment
- renovate existing infrastructure (including painting, new carpet etc.)
- deliver play area upgrades including trees, play equipment and soft fall surface
- refurbish toilets, change rooms and shower blocks
- provide new rainwater tanks and school gardens
- creation of shaded areas (through shade cloths and covered areas)

Council sees each of these upgrades as vital. It has been Council's experience in the past that while the government may have committed funds to projects such as these, the funds have a tendency of disappearing within the broader Directorate budget. Ideally, a structured and targeted program should be implemented system-wide and itemised within the budget.

Planning for new schools

ACT Treasury projections are that Canberra's population will increase from 400,000 in 2017 to 500,000 in 2033 with an additional 18,377 school aged children during those 16 years.

While some of these additional children will be accommodated in expanded existing schools, it appears that there will be a need for a number of new schools, especially as new areas such as West Belconnen are developed for housing. Particularly at the primary level, but also at the high school level, Council is a strong believer in the neighbourhood school model for many reasons, not the least of which is sustainable and active travel to school. Funding needs to be budgeted with new schools in mind.

School Traffic Safety Measures

Council recommends a targeted increase in the budgets of TAMS and ETD to allow them to make roads around schools safer.

The issue of road safety around ACT schools is often raised at P&C and Council meetings. Parents express concerns about:

- drivers speeding through school zones
- lack of pick up and set down facilities
- drivers failing to stop at flagged crossings
- unsafe car parks and narrow roads
- insufficient parking.

Council has welcomed the recent pilot program into new safety measures around ACT schools. We also welcome funding for supervised school crossings in 20 ACT schools.

We are particularly pleased with the commitment to create individual school traffic management plans in each ACT public school. But these plans cannot be a one off measure. To be effective, they need to be updated at least every two years. Accordingly, Council calls for targeted funding to ensure that relevant authorities are adequately funded to continue reviewing and redrafting these plans in the future.

No doubt these traffic management plans will recommend various measures should be implemented in many schools. Council calls upon the Government to set aside funding to implement these traffic management plans and the wide range of physical measures that may be required.

Café Style Canteens

High School and College canteens are facing major difficulties. Council requests funding to convert some of these canteens into café style outlets.

Over the past couple of years a significant amount of time, money and effort has been put into improving school canteens in the ACT. However, evidence obtained by Council has suggested that colleges and high schools are still facing many difficulties. Council believes 'café' style facilities are the answer.

Council has been busy implementing several changes to the way in which canteens are run in the ACT. Thanks in part to government funding, electronic point of sale systems have been offered to canteens all across the ACT, along with membership to the Healthy Kids Association and the provision of online ordering arrangements with FlexiSchools. Colleges and high schools are still facing an uphill battle when it comes to attracting and catering to older students. Increasingly students are electing to purchase food from outside the school grounds: from Subway, McDonalds, 7-Eleven and other outlets instead of their school canteen. This does not help the school community or the ACT Government's healthy food strategy.

In some schools the traditional canteen has been transformed into a café style facility. By making the canteen into a social hub, we believe that it will become more appealing to the student demographic. This will open up opportunities to students to design the new space and also partake in hospitality training on the school grounds (whether in food preparation, retail or barista courses).

Supporting Volunteers in Schools

Volunteer Outreach

Council calls for funds to organise an outreach and advertising campaign designed to encourage parents to volunteer at their school.

P&Cs across Canberra are currently experiencing difficulty in attracting and retaining volunteers at their school. Many valued school services (like P&C committees, uniform shops, canteens and reading groups) rely on the work of volunteers. By raising the profile of volunteers, Council hopes to encourage more parents to engage with their school community. Not only will this ensure the ongoing viability of these services, but as a consequence parents will also engage with their child's school and education.

Backroom Support

Schools should receive funding so that P&Cs can utilise the expertise of school staff.

Council believes that funding should be directed to schools so that P&Cs can utilise school staff in financial, legal and operational matters. For some P&Cs the role of controlling a small enterprise involved in a number of businesses is far too much for volunteers to handle. It is hoped that by leveraging off the expertise of school staff, P&Cs can spend more time making a meaningful contribution to the school, rather than getting bogged down in paperwork and bureaucracy.