



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

29 October 2018

Dear Andrew,

On behalf of the ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council), I am writing to provide a submission to the 2019-2020 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty McGovern-Hooley', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kirsty McGovern-Hooley
President

Budget Submission 2019 - 20



**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 over 60,000 parents in 85 ACT public schools.

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Executive Summary

Council welcomes the *Future of Education* strategy which aims to deliver equitable education to all Canberra students, irrespective of the school they attend. Council believes that local neighbourhood schools build social capital within local communities and ease congestion, promoting active travel. Council calls on the ACT Government to build new schools in East Gungahlin, Central Belconnen and the Inner North to ensure all students have access to a local public school.

Council is concerned that demand and increases in school capacity place has compromised school libraries and other specialist purpose-built facilities in some schools. Council strongly believes equitable education requires every student in every school to have regular access to dedicated school libraries, qualified teacher librarians, specialist school facilities, specialist programs and language pathways. Council encourages the Education Directorate to continue to apply priority area enrolment (PEA) policy and the northern and southern pathways for NSW residents to ensure students have adequate access to school facilities, in their local schools. Council also supports the use of demountable buildings to accommodate temporary increases in student enrolments.

Council urges the ACT Government to commit funds to implement wholistic strategies for the elimination of violence in schools for both teachers and students, such as the cost-effective everyday practice of mindfulness in schools. Council remains committed to working with the Education Directorate to reduce all violence in schools.

Council is recommending the Government allocate additional funding to meet gaps in needs-based funding for students with high, complex and challenging behavioural needs and gifted and talented students. Council also recommends that every high school employs a qualified social worker, youth worker or counsellor to assist students who have disengaged from learning or are at risk of disengaging.

Council understands the value parental engagement adds to students' educational outcomes and is eager to support the development and implementation of a system wide parental engagement model. This model would include the appointment of community liaison officers and residual schools, to engage with parents and carers, building community confidence in local schools.

Equitable Education

Access to local neighbourhood schools

Council calls on the ACT Government to fund the building of new schools to address development and population projections in the ACT. Council strongly believes that all ACT residents ought to have access to quality neighbourhood (local) public schools.

Council members are particularly concerned by ACT public schools at, above or approaching capacity. Member feedback cites educational inequity in reduced access to school facilities such as libraries, gymnasiums and other school specialist facilities. Members are particularly concerned by insufficient school capacity in Gungahlin, central Belconnen and along the tram corridor in the City.

Gungahlin

Current projections suggest that Gungahlin school population will double in the next 10 years, representing an 92% increase or additional 6894 students. It is expected some of this demand will be alleviated by the new school in Taylor opening in 2019 with a capacity of 600 students and option for an additional 150 students. While Council appreciates that Government does not wish to over-cater and instead base the number of schools on the likely long-term population of young people in the region (not the current age profile of Gungahlin). Council believes that the current approach is much too conservative.

Recommendation 1 - At minimum, the ACT Government commit funding to build a new school in East Gungahlin.

Central Belconnen

In the last decade there has been a large increase in high density development within Belconnen town centre and even larger developments are now planned, including the tallest building in Canberra (10 years) and much of this is residential. Given that families make up a significant proportion of people moving into these new residences, the need for a school must be addressed. Currently inner Belconnen is in PEA for Macquarie Primary (currently at 85% capacity) or Florey Primary (Currently 78% capacity) depending on the address. All schools are at some distance from the area (Macquarie Primary 1.8km; Florey Primary 2km; Aranda 2.2km (new demountables installed and PEA reduced recently), 2.5km Weetangera, Southern Cross Early Childhood 3km). The Education Directorate has previously suggested that central Belconnen students could be sent to Northern Belconnen schools with available capacity. However, Council members find this option unfeasible and impractical, increasing travel time, preventing active travel and the social capital that evolves from local neighbourhood public schools.

Recommendation 2 – The ACT Government commit funding to purchase land and build a local public primary school in central Belconnen.

Inner North

The Inner Northern schools are already in strong demand and operate close to or above school capacity (Ainslie Primary 76%, Campbell Primary 88%, Lyneham Primary 86%, Majura Primary 89%, North Ainslie Primary 101%, Turner Primary 84%, Campbell High 83% and Lyneham High 103%). Development along the tram corridor is expected to place further strain on the capacity of these schools within the next few years.

Recommendation 3 – The ACT Government fund the purchase of land, using innovative solutions to build a vertical school in the tram corridor, close to and linked with existing open urban spaces including parks.

Molonglo, Woden and Weston Creek

Significant capacity pressures also exist in Woden and Weston Creek schools (Mawson Primary 103%, Red Hill Primary 104%, Yarralumla 111%, Garran Primary 99%, Curtin Primary 98%, Chapman Primary 95% and Arawang Primary 93%).

Recommendation 4 - Council encourages the Education Directorate to continue to apply the current Priority Enrolment Area (PEA) policy for ACT residents and the North and South pathways for NSW residents.

School libraries

Currently, school Principals can choose to use the library as a permanent teaching space. Council member feedback shows that some public schools use the school library as a permanent classroom due to high capacity (currently Mawson and formerly Aranda). Accordingly, student access to the library is reduced or varied. In some cases, libraries have been relocated to shared spaces such as hall ways. Furthermore, student access to the library for library classes, reading material and lunchtime activities may be restricted. Council members strongly believe that school libraries are an essential component to developing student literacy and promoting equitable education.

Recommendation 5 - Every school has a library with dedicated space for library learning, ensuring all students have regular access to school libraries. Council also encourages the Education Directorate to implement the PEA policy and use demountables for temporary increases in student enrolments.

Specialist facilities, demountables and outdoor spaces

Despite assurances from the Education Directorate, specialist purpose-built facilities have been re-purposed to make way for additional student capacity in some schools. Council members consider these specialist purpose-built facilities including but not limited to language rooms, environment centres, music rooms, classroom kitchens etc are features of quality education.

Council calls on the Education Directorate to exclude these facilities from the capacity calculations and thereby ensure specialist purpose-built facilities are retained, unless adequate alternatives are made available. Council also calls for all students to have access to these specialist facilities within schools, irrespective of the number of students attending the school.

Council considers demountable classrooms are appropriate for temporary increases in student capacity, however permanent increases in student capacity should be catered for with permanent facilities.

Recommendation 6 - Council encourages the Education Directorate to ensure that quality schools include and retain specialist purpose-built facilities to maintain quality learning environments, including but not limited to quiet areas and sensory spaces.

Every local school is a great school

The top priority for parents and carers attending Council's Future of Education Forum was for every *public school to be a great school*, irrespective of postcode. Together with Council, parents and carers strongly believe that all students have access to a great education, including access to teacher librarians, specialist programs, opportunities, language pathways, feedback and complaints handling.

Teacher librarians

Data shows that for every ACT public school that retains the services of a qualified teacher librarian, another 5 schools miss out. Research shows that schools with qualified teacher librarians and well-resourced libraries results in improved literacy outcomes for students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of qualified teacher librarians located within public schools are situated in areas of higher educational advantage. Research also shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often start school education at least 12 months behind students from educationally advantaged backgrounds. It is critical that all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to public schools with qualified teacher librarians. Council understands that the absence of teacher librarians, may be an example of the unintended consequence of needs-based funding, resulting in smaller schools facing greater challenges to employ specialist teachers.

Recommendation 7 - Council recommends that the needs-based funding model be reviewed against scale and allowances or measures be included to encourage employment of a teacher librarian at every school. It is expected that some cost savings could be found sharing qualified teacher librarians across neighbouring schools (for example Gilmore and Richardson Primary Schools).

Specialist programs

Parents and carers at the Council's *Future of Education Forum* identified specialist programs, academic and educational opportunities provided by schools like Lyneham and Alfred Deakin High Schools as key features of quality public education. These public schools are often located in areas of higher educational advantage with demographic profiles similar to exclusive private schools. Equitable education requires that all students, no matter how disadvantaged are provided with the similar access to specialist programs, academic and educational opportunities.

Recommendation 8 - Council recommends that the needs-based funding model be reviewed against scale and allowances or measures be included to support specialist programs at every high school.

Language pathways

Parent and carer feedback highlights the need for consistent language pathways between local primary school, high school and college. Currently students attending their in-area PEA primary school may learn one language, to arrive at high school and be required to learn a different language. The lack of language pathways creates additional challenges for high school teachers having to cater for students with 7 years of language experience, while other students have to start from the beginning. Potentially this could be addressed with streaming, however some of the high schools may not have sufficient student numbers to support this approach.

Recommendation 9 - Develop and implement 3 year plan for PEA schools to transition to using language pathways between primary, high school and college.

Violence and bullying in schools

Violence and bullying occurring in schools is a reflection of the behaviour which occurs generally in society. While the economic cost of bullying in Australian schools is \$2.3 billion dollars (*National Centre Against Bullying, 2018*), we know that violence in schools often causes ongoing trauma for victims (school staff and students), although the economic cost of this violence is unknown. Council welcomes the ACT Governments' commitment of an additional \$2.4 million dollars to address violence against school staff, and an extra \$100,000 dollars to address violence and bullying of students (October, 2018).

Council strongly supports the reduction of violence in schools and looks forward to engaging in the development of these initiatives. Council encourages the ACT Government to approach the occurrence of violence in schools with a wholistic approach, by ensuring the consistent behavioural expectations for all community members. Council envisions that these behavioural expectations must apply universally despite differing legal obligations and irrespective of whether violence effects school staff or students.

Additionally, a recent trial of mindfulness for Year 3 students at Giralang Primary School in the ACT, demonstrated a 95% reduction in the negative behaviours of students, including violence, in addition to many other benefits (such as a more settled classroom environment, increases in student concentration, productivity and improvements in student self-regulation). The trial implemented the use of the Smiling Mind program (including teacher training at a cost of \$1500 per workshop, manuals and resources are freely available). For more information on the trial please refer to Attachment A in the *Appendices*. The results of the trial were so successful and easy for teachers to implement the trial was expanded to the whole school. Council strongly supports the consistent use of mindfulness programs in all ACT public schools.

Recommendation 10 - The ACT Government commit to the implementation of cost effective mindfulness programs (Smiling Mind) in public schools everyday to reduce unacceptable student behaviours, particularly the occurrence of violence and self-regulation.

Unintentional consequences of needs-based funding

Every school has a small number of students with high complex and challenging behavioural needs. Current needs-based funding arrangements are inadequate to fund the resources required to support these students. The current model of funding only provides additional funds for students with diagnostic evidence, while other students with complex and challenging behaviours are generally supported out of a schools' general resources. Council is seriously concerned that schools are not receiving the funds required to provide the resources and support for these small number of students. Even if risk management strategies are applied, Council is concerned that lack of resources is placing students and teachers at risk.

Recommendation 11 - Where students require full time or one on one eyes on support, additional funding should be available for the school for student management, staff resources and staff training.

Gifted and talented students

Gifted and talented students often require adjustments to be made to their curriculum. Presently, these adjustments must be resourced by a schools' general revenue. Council is aware that in some cases, schools do not recognise gifted and talented students at all. Similar to students with disabilities, gifted and talented students require needs-based funding to ensure appropriate curriculum adjustments are made as required.

Recommendation 12 - The ACT Government allocated needs-based funding for gifted and talented students to resource curriculum adjustments.

Disengaging students

Member feedback to Council suggests that a proportion of students disengage from education during high school. Council is concerned that teachers spend valuable teaching time trying to re-engage students in their learning, without necessarily having the formal qualifications skills or capacity to provide effective support. Council considers placing qualified counsellors, social workers or youth workers in every high school would provide disengaged students or students at risk of disengaging with the support services, encouragement to re-engage with their learning. Using the services of a qualified counsellor, social worker or youth worker allows teachers to focus on the teaching and learning of their students.

Recommendation 13 - The ACT Government fund the employment of a qualified counsellor, social worker or youth worker (not teachers) in every public high school, to work with students at risk of disengaging. Based on the approximate full time equivalent salary of \$70,000 Council across 26 high schools, Council expects this would cost the Government \$1.82 million.

Monitor and review of the implementation of *Future of Education strategy*

Council welcomed the consultation of the Future of Education in the ACT which many organisations and community partners, parents, carers and students provided valuable feedback to. Council believes the implementation of the *Future of Education strategy* will determine whether the strategy is successful in achieving the stated objectives.

Recommendation 14 - The ACT Government fund the monitoring and review of the implementation of the *Future of Education strategy* in ACT public schools.

Parental Engagement

Early learning education for 3-year-olds

Council welcomes the announcement of the Government to fund early learning education for 3-year-olds to address disparity in educational outcomes. With the recent merger between P&C Council and the Canberra Preschool Society, Council now represents the views of parents and carers on early education, preschool and school. Council looks forward to contributing to the development of early learning education framework for 3-year-olds in the ACT.

Develop and implementation of system wide parental engagement model

In 2016 the ACT Government promised to deliver \$1.6 million dollars over 4 years for parental engagement, specifically to support parent groups within schools. The 2018-19 ACT budget allocated \$600,000 more schools, better schools – Supporting parents to help their kids learn, of

which \$148,000 is scheduled to provide a parental engagement officer within the Education Directorate for the 2018-2019 year.

Council considers placement of an engagement officer within the directorate a top-down approach that is unlikely to be successful on its own. True parental engagement arises when parents and carers become actively involved and interested in their students' education. Council strongly believes a wholistic grass roots approach within local public school communities using targeted and supported opportunities for engagement is also required.

P&C associations are fantastic examples of a wholistic grass roots approach to parental engagement, building social capital, supporting community connections and providing local public school services (canteens, uniform shops and OSHC). Council provides extensive support to P&Cs whom in turn provide wonderful opportunities for parents and carers to engage with student learning.

Recommendation 15 – The ACT Government allocate funds for:

- a collaborative project between Council and the Education Directorate to define parental engagement. The *Future of Education* consultation identified that parental engagement is currently widely interpreted and therefore challenging to implement a one size fits all model.
- a grants program for P&Cs to develop capacity building, social capital and parental engagement initiatives in public schools.
- digital platform development, exploring opportunities for SAS (Sentral) to promote and support parental engagement and improve communication with parents.
- Redevelop parental engagement resources, including specific strategies to engage hard to reach parents and tool kits for successful parental engagement initiatives.

Feedback, complaints handling and external independent reviewer

Council welcomes the Education Directorate's efforts to improve complaints handling through the implementation of new resources, which Council has contributed to. Despite the implementation of these resources, Council remains critically concerned that the substance of complaints remains unaddressed despite potential breaches of human rights, duty of care, discrimination and failure to adhere to the Directorate's policies.

Parents and carers are especially concerned that the Education Directorate's complaint handling process is difficult to navigate, confrontational and difficult to resolve given the imbalance of power. Feedback suggests that raising complaints at the school and directorate level often results back to the school principal, leading to a breakdown of trust, causing further distress to students, parents and carers.

Council is concerned that the lack of an external independent reviewer for public school complaints handling compromises the quality of the process and potential resolution.

Recommendation 16 - The ACT Government appoint an independent external reviewer with power and capacity to investigate complaints handling and implement resolutions for public schools and the Education Directorate such as an Ombudsman.

Review of school board effectiveness

Parents and citizens representatives on ACT public school boards question the effectiveness of their contributions to school boards in setting the direction for their school. Many parent and citizen representatives describe a process driven exercise to approve high level financial information without any detail or information about programs, lack of genuine opportunities to advise or consult with the community, and critical inconsistencies between the planning and action phases. Further parent and citizen representatives identify that a number of Principals incorrectly classify all school board meeting information as confidential, preventing transparency and communication with the broader school community. Lack of transparency and communication means that many parents and carers within a school community do not understand the direction schools are heading in and therefore cannot support the Principal on journeys of school improvement. Parent and citizen representatives are keen to use their experience, skills and capabilities to invest in their school given genuine opportunities to contribute.

Recommendation 17 - The ACT Government commit to a review of the effectiveness of school boards, including surveying all school board representatives to ascertain whether:

- board representatives felt listened to?
- board representatives felt they made a valuable contribution to the school?
- board reports were available to the P&C and school community?

Community Liaison Officers and residual schools

Analysis of the Education Directorates' 2018 census data shows trends away from some public schools (residual schools), towards both out of area public and private schools. Council proposes that two community liaison officers be allocated within two public schools for a two year trial, to develop school branding, communication strategies and community confidence. Community liaison officers would work with school principals, P&Cs, school communities and feeder school communities by showcasing educational excellence and restoring community confidence.

Recommendation 18 - The ACT Government fund the employment of 2 community liaison officers in two public schools for a 2-year trial, at the estimated cost of \$280,000 (2 years, including evaluation).

APPENDICES A

Mindfulness in ACT primary schools

Proposal for primary school trial

Proposal: To trial a daily mindfulness program for Grade 3 students over 12-months at 10 primary schools in the ACT as an early intervention strategy targeting mental health and negative behaviour in schools.

Background:

Research on the effectiveness of mindfulness as a basic self-management skill in schools has been carried out by research institutions around the world as well as locally at Giralang Primary School in 2015 providing a case for consideration by the ACT Education Directorate. The ACT can build on this and in particular the Giralang experience through a larger trial at 10 of the territory's primary schools. By doing so, the ACT Government would be giving primary school children a skill with which they will be better equipped to handle the challenges of teenage years and secondary school, as well as reduce negative behaviour especially bullying in schools and improve the learning environment in classrooms. This proposal fits within the ACT Education Directorate's Safe and Supportive Schools policy requirement for schools to implement a Social Emotional Learning approach in each school.

The Problem:

Mental Health:

Society is experiencing rapid and major changes including increased testing of young Australians and pressure to perform. Many children have become over-scheduled and parents are working longer hours. Children and teenagers are spending significant periods of time on computers, tablets and mobile phones which [research](#) shows leads to poorer wellbeing. Being busy and stressed appears to have become the new norm. This set of circumstances is creating significant mental health and educational challenges for young Australians.

Mental health statistics:

- 1 in 16 young Australians is currently experiencing depression
- 1 in 6 is currently experiencing anxiety
- 1 in 4 currently has a mental health condition
- Suicide is the biggest killer of young Australians
- Young people are most concerned about stress, school or study problems and body image in that order
- Concern about mental health among young people is growing
- A quarter of young Australians say they are unhappy with their lives
- (sources: Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Mission Australia Annual Youth Survey, Youth Beyond Blue)

Bullying:

Bullying is a problem in schools. The Australian Institute of Family Studies says Australian primary schools have among the highest reported rates of bullying in the world. According to some statistics 1 in 4 students have experienced bullying. Every child has the right to a safe school. The ACT Education Directorate has a Safe and Supportive Schools policy which articulates the importance of providing safe, respectful and supportive school environments.

Solution:

In the last few years, schools have become increasingly focused on the wellbeing and social and emotional education of their students.

Mindfulness is defined as the art of paying attention to the present moment with intention, openness and curiosity, and without judgement. This discipline of the mind is growing in popularity as a mental health and self-care strategy. Researchers have done a number of school trials in recent years. Of particular note, Professor Lea Waters from Melbourne

University and her team did a [meta-review](#) of the impact of mindfulness in schools in Australia, Canada, India, the US, UK and Taiwan combining the results of 15 studies and almost 1800 students. They found mindfulness is beneficial in most cases and led to three outcomes for students: higher wellbeing, better social skills and greater academic skills. Likewise, a 12-month mindfulness trial of Grade 3 students by Sydney University showed a substantial increase in student wellbeing. And research done by [Deakin University](#) at 12 schools in Melbourne showed improvements in sleep, emotional wellbeing and engagement with school, and reductions in classroom disruptions and bullying.

Research on mindfulness in schools shows it:

- reduces stress, anxiety and depression
- increases resilience
- assists in lowering the incidence of mental health problems
- increases positive emotion, vitality, life satisfaction, self esteem
- enhances more focused and clearer thinking, executive attention, memory and
- heightened performance and achievement
- enhances the ability to self regulate

(sources include: [Harvard](#), [Oxford](#), [University of Wisconsin-Madison](#), [Deakin University](#))

Mindfulness trial at Giralang Primary School:

Giralang Primary School undertook a mindfulness trial for Grade 3 students in 2015. The trial arose from the need to produce some data in the ACT primary school system. It involved a short daily mindfulness session followed by debrief and journaling. A mindfulness in schools educational program developed by the not-for-profit mindfulness education provider Smiling Mind was chosen as it could be easily slotted into the daily school schedule. The study looked at the impact of a daily 5-10 minute mindfulness session conducted by the class teacher on the wellbeing and social skills of Grade 3 students over an eight-week period. The students were assessed using the SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire), a standardized and validated mental health risk scale (www.sdqinfo.com). As part of this process the class teacher filled out questionnaires for each student before and after the program. Listed below are the results:

- The mean total SDQ (Mental Health Risk) dropped by 51% based on a t-test ($p < 0.02$).
- The class teacher gave feedback that the class become a calmer and nice place to be and learn. She noticed positive changes in student behaviour towards themselves and each other, and saw students who had been seldom heard, finding their voices. Some students commented that they were sleeping better, others said they felt calmer because of the program.

Since then Giralang Primary has expanded daily mindfulness practise to all students in 2016 and 2017.

The benefits as reported by the school include:

- 95% drop in negative student behaviour in 2016
- Teachers report classrooms settled, calm and productive, and work output after
- mindfulness practise is higher
- Students reporting sleeping better
- Parent satisfaction survey revealed increased satisfaction in the school's management
- of student behaviour
- There is now no resistance to mindfulness practise

Trial Proposal:

It is proposed to set up a trial at 10 ACT primary schools targeting Grade 3 students.

The key points:

- A 12-month trial of a daily mindfulness practise in 10 schools.

- Grade 3 students
- Mindfulness program and teacher training to be conducted by Smiling Mind
- Research component to be carried out by a researcher

The aim of the trial is to gather more data in the ACT on the impact of a daily mindfulness program on mental and emotional health and behaviour in primary school students. While the Giralang trial showed a significant improvement in the mental health of Grade 3 students, it was a small-scale trial over one school term. The aim of this trial would be to assess a daily mindfulness practise in a larger pool of students over 12 months providing a more comprehensive assessment of mindfulness as an intervention. Research results to date as outlined above have shown a positive impact on schools, thus it is expected the trial will do likewise, further strengthening the case for the introduction of a daily mindfulness program in ACT primary schools.

The cost of the 12-month trial is estimated at around \$52,909 or around \$1,000/week and covers:

- Two 90-minute workshops with teachers from Smiling Mind (\$1,500 per workshop plus GST = \$3,000 plus GST)(NB: Smiling Mind only charges for the cost of training, the manual and teaching resources are available for free)
- Research component using SDQ assessment tool which is free. The cost would be to pay a researcher to carrying out data collection, data entry, analysis and report compilation (8 weeks full-time casual hr rate for research assistant \$50.24 = \$15,273)
- Project management (6-8 week trial set up at 3 days/week, plus ongoing management over 4 school terms requiring approximately 10 hours/week at pay rate \$58.00/hr = \$34,336)

Possible funding sources:

- ACT Education Directorate
- ACT Health Department
- ACT Education and ACT Health Department joint funding
- Philanthropic
- Grants

The Mindfulness in ACT primary schools proposal is supported by:

- ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations
- Headspace ACT
- Thomas Nielsen PhD, Associate Professor in Education, University of Canberra
- Former senator Katy Gallagher

For more information contact P&C Council.