

Mr Danton Leary, Secretary  
Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion  
ACT Legislative Assembly  
GPO Box 1020  
Canberra ACT 2601

Via email: [LCommitteeECI@parliament.act.gov.au](mailto:LCommitteeECI@parliament.act.gov.au)

Dear Mr Leary,

### **Inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure**

The ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission into the Inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure.

ACTCOSS advocates for social justice in the ACT and represents not-for-profit community organisations. We believe that Canberra can be a just, safe and sustainable community in which everyone, including children and young people, has the opportunity for self-determination and a fair share of resources and services.

Any inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure must have principles of access and inclusion as its focus, and work toward improving inclusive education in the ACT to enable children with disability to participate in mainstream schooling safely and successfully.

We must also prioritise adequate and high-quality school infrastructure in all areas of the ACT, including and especially for pockets of disadvantage in the Territory. Schools are centres of education, but they are also community meeting places, sporting grounds and places that offer greenspace, and it is important that wherever possible we open and expand this resource for the wider ACT population, especially as the city becomes denser. We would also refer you to our [submission](#) to the ACT Planning review for priorities on schools as urban infrastructure.

Though we are focusing on accessibility and inclusion in this submission, we do support broader school infrastructure management reforms and we endorse the ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations' submission to this inquiry. The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations is calling for a centralised approach to the management of infrastructure and maintenance that will deliver an equitable outcome across schools. The centralised approach will also provide administrative

relief for school staff. This process should be underpinned by the development of infrastructure condition reports with corresponding planning and budgeting for scheduled maintenance. We also advocate for transparency in relation to school infrastructure management, to ensure that allocation of resources is equitable and in accordance with principles of inclusion and access.

The ACT Government's Future of Education Strategy holds Equity, Student Agency, Access and Inclusion as its four guiding principles, as well as naming Inclusive Education as the first priority of the first phase of implementation of the strategy. Clearly, the ACT Government is committed to ensuring that education is inclusive and accessible for all young people, including those with a disability. This inquiry offers an opportunity to put these principles into practice.

We know that students with disability should, can and deserve to be wholly included physically, socially and academically within mainstream schools, and that inclusion within mainstream school environments leads to better social and vocational outcomes for *all* young people and children, as well as for their parents and carers.

The ACT has a number of segregated settings, though there is little evidence to suggest this model is successful or helpful. Instead, students need to be supported to participate in mainstream schooling.

The evidence consistently shows that students with disabilities educated in general education environments outperform their peers who have been educated in segregated settings. The research also demonstrates the positive impacts of inclusive learning environments for non-disabled students in academic performance, social skills, development of moral and ethical principles and capacity for empathy.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of this inquiry and for management and planning of future school infrastructure, the ACT Government should be guided by the definition of 'inclusive education' as provided by Imagine More in accordance with Human Rights instruments including [Article 24](#) of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disability. Inclusive education happens when all children are physically present and participating in the same classroom, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Alana and Abt Associates, [A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education \[PDF\]](#), Alana and Abt Associates, 2016, accessed 28 April 2021.

same playground and at the same time as all children in the school community.<sup>2</sup>

In relation to inquiry reference points B and C, we urge the committee to prioritise accessibility in the ongoing maintenance of school facilities and planning for future infrastructure needs, including in the use of temporary facilities for schools running above capacity.

Any planning to address the current and future infrastructure needs in schools should also acknowledge the reality of climate change. Energy-conscious design will contribute to energy savings, but it will also encourage students' engagement and capacity for learning. We call on the ACT Government to make sure that schools are climate-proofed, with adequate green spaces and sufficient consideration of building orientation, temperature monitoring, and energy systems, such that school facilities do not become 'heat-islands'.

In relation to reference point F on classroom design, we support Carers ACT's call for welcoming and 'gentle', soothing spaces that are designed with those who have sensory issues in mind. This means, as per People with Disabilities ACT's position on education, there should be no use of bars in the education environment, and very little use of harsh lighting, poor acoustics or poorly chosen colour schemes. Instead, students should have daily access to social interactions, the outdoors, natural light, fresh air, and stimulating and engaging learning activities.

In relation to point I, we commend the consideration of accessibility for students and staff with a disability within the inquiry. We hope that this consideration also extends to parents with disability, who must be supported to fully engage with their children's education in the ACT.

ACTCOSS advocates for inclusive education in accordance with Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disability<sup>3</sup> and notes that the Australian Government's National Disability Strategy holds inclusive education as one of its six key outcome areas.<sup>4</sup> We believe that this inquiry represents an

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2 Imagine More, [Inclusive Education](#), Imagine More website, n.d., accessed 10 May 2021.

3 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs – Disability, '[Article 24 - Education](#)', *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*, United Nations, n.d., accessed 14 May 2021.

4 Commonwealth of Australia, [2010-2020 National Disability Strategy Summary Document \[PDF\]](#), Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, accessed 28 April 2021.

opportunity to reaffirm the ACT Government's strong commitment to principles of inclusivity and accessibility and help children and young people in the ACT achieve their best.

As per Carers ACT's submission, we recommend the ACT Government investigate accessible and universal school design in other jurisdictions, such as the South Australian Department of Education's resources on universal design incorporating both physical accessibility and spaces to encourage mental and emotional self-regulation.<sup>5</sup>

Just as the ACT Government supports the introduction of mandatory accessibility standards in the National Construction Code and values accessibility design in housing, so should the ACT Government value accessibility in schools. This approach to designing schools would ensure accessibility but also a sense of belonging and togetherness for all students, teachers, parents, carers and the broader community.

I welcome any opportunities to engage further with the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. If you wish to discuss any of the topics raised further, please contact me on 02 6202 7200, or on the email address below.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emma Campbell." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr Emma Campbell  
Chief Executive Officer

Email: [emma.campbell@actcoss.org.au](mailto:emma.campbell@actcoss.org.au)

13 May 2021

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<sup>5</sup> Department for Education, Government of South Australia, [Designing buildings and spaces for everyone](#), Government of South Australia, n.d., accessed 28 April 2021.