



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION  
AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION**

(Reference: [Inquiry into the Future of School Infrastructure in the ACT](#))

**Members:**

**MR M PETERSSON (Chair)  
MR J DAVIS (Deputy Chair)  
MS N LAWDER**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**TUESDAY, 8 AUGUST 2023**

**Secretary to the committee:  
Dr A Chynoweth (Ph: 620 75498)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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## **Privilege statement**

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While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, it may take evidence in-camera if requested. Confidential evidence will be recorded and kept securely. It is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly; but any decision to publish or present in-camera evidence will not be taken without consulting with the person who gave the evidence.

*Amended 20 May 2013*

**The committee met at 12.00 pm.**

**TAYLOR, MS LORRAINE**, Principal - Primary, Silverstream School

**THE CHAIR:** Good afternoon, and welcome to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion's inquiry into the future of school infrastructure in the ACT.

The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. The committee wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's event.

The proceedings today are being broadcast live. The written transcript will be published on the Assembly website. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses used these words: "I will take that question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm later.

Our first two witnesses today are based overseas and will be appearing via Webex. We now welcome Ms Lorraine Taylor, Principal of Silverstream School, from Wellington, New Zealand. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today. Do you have anything to add about the capacity in which you appear?

**Ms Taylor:** I am a school principal of 18 years and have 35 years in teaching.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. I would like to remind all witnesses today of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement that has been provided to you. Witnesses must tell the truth. The giving of false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it.

**Ms Taylor:** I agree and understand.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Ms Taylor:** Absolutely.

**THE CHAIR:** The floor is yours.

**Ms Taylor:** Thank you very much.

*Ms Taylor then spoke in Maori.*

Good afternoon. It is just about afternoon for you guys; it is afternoon here, definitely. As I said before, I have been a principal for 18 years. I started my teaching career in the UK. I have been in New Zealand for nearly 27 years. In the last six or seven years I have been involved in a number of school building projects, as principal. Over that

time I have been in a position to form a considered opinion on what works well in terms of providing an environment that is conducive to effective learning and what presents challenges for students and teachers.

In my current school, we have 22 classroom spaces. All of them are single spaces, with around 25 students in them. Eleven were purpose-built single spaces and 11 were purpose-built open-plan spaces. Eight were double rooms, for around 60 students, and three were triple rooms, for around 90 students.

The philosophy of the teaching and learning approaches in those open-plan spaces when they were built was constructivist in nature—inquiry-based practices, which are common across New Zealand. However, the academic data for reading, writing and mathematics across New Zealand currently indicates that this has resulted in lower achievement in reading, writing and maths.

Those 11 open-plan rooms that we had were closed by way of large dividing glass doors, initially as a result of the COVID bubbles, but we have not reopened them. The school and teaching philosophy has now changed to incorporate and deliver structured literacy and an increasingly structured approach to mathematics. The removal of digital devices, except for specific purposes, has also taken place.

We have found that, as a result of this, rooms are quieter, calmer and more supportive for students, in particular for those who have ADHD, are neurodiverse or have autism spectrum disorder. Distractions and noise are reduced. Any further classroom spaces that we put together will be designed as spaces which function as quiet single spaces but have the ability to be opened into double spaces, should that be needed. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. How was the decision to keep the single spaces received by students and parents?

**Ms Taylor:** We are a primary school, so the students were not very invested in whether they were in a big space or a single space. The children are aged five to 11, so we did not do an awful lot of consultation. We have not really had any feedback from students on that, apart from the children that we work more intensively with, who are autism spectrum disorder students and students who are neurodiverse. Their feedback has been that they like the quieter spaces. We consulted with parents and 100 per cent of our parents wanted single space classrooms for their children.

**THE CHAIR:** What was the response of government, the education department that you have to deal with? It sounds to me, from the current policy, that they prefer open-plan classrooms. It seems like you have differentiated yourselves from that norm. Did they respond?

**Ms Taylor:** Yes. It is really interesting, isn't it? I do not know how much you guys know about the way that New Zealand's education policy is developed. It is a very, very, very devolved policy. Schools have an enormous amount of autonomy around curriculum, resourcing and how they fit their classrooms out. They do not have a lot of control over the building of new classrooms, because that is largely driven by how much money is available. But, really, schools are left to make their own decisions.

There has not been a lot of discussion from the Ministry of Education around what we are doing.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you.

**MR DAVIS:** The last stakeholder group we did not cover was teachers. How did your teachers react? You just articulated that you have got a lot of autonomy, in terms of how you run your school. That is certainly the case in the ACT, with our school leaders having a lot of autonomy to recruit and retain their staff. The committee heard in a past inquiry that the built environment has a huge impact on the ability to recruit and retain staff. I imagine that you would have recruited staff who were prepared to work in an open-plan work environment and then you changed that. How have your staff related to that change?

**Ms Taylor:** That is a very good question. Certainly, when they came to the school, the teachers were quite used to working in open-plan spaces. They had never been given any training in how to work collaboratively, so they were making the best of it that they could, which was not great.

Initially we did not suggest it. It sounds awful, but we fortunately had the COVID situation of bubbles, which meant we had to close our spaces down. When I suggested that we not reopen the spaces, there were a few teachers who said, “But I liked working in a big space, collaboratively.” We had quite a bit of work to do around what made effective teaching. We had the data and the evidence for what was happening with students’ achievement. We did have a few teachers who did not like it and left. They went to work in schools where they could work in an open space again. Then we recruited teachers who wanted to work in single spaces.

**MR DAVIS:** At the risk of asking you to tell on your former staff, I am interested to understand what, in those exit interviews or anecdotally, you learnt from those staff as their resistance to the bubble environment? Why was it such a big decision for them, moving to this new model, that they were prepared to leave and work in a different school environment?

**Ms Taylor:** I think it was largely around the philosophy of teaching and learning. Across New Zealand there is currently—and has been for a significant number of years—a very constructivist approach and an inquiry-based approach. Students work on inquiry-based projects right from age five, in a play-based learning environment. It is a very child-centred discovery kind of teaching and learning approach. It has resulted in some very poor outcomes for some of our most vulnerable students. I guess it is a philosophy difference. Those people wanted to continue with those deeper learning pedagogies, that inquiry-based approach, which I could not subscribe to.

**MR DAVIS:** That leads to my substantive question about those academic outcomes. I am particularly interested in diving into the vulnerable student cohort that you have articulated. I was not aware, and the committee has not heard previously, of a disproportionate impact on vulnerable students. First of all, how would you, in a school environment, classify a vulnerable student? How would you quantify a distinct reduction in their learning outcomes on the basis of open-plan learning?

**Ms Taylor:** How I would classify students that I would consider vulnerable in terms of teaching and learning is those students who are not necessarily getting the kind of reading and writing support at home that other kids might get. Those students come to school not able to write their name, not sure what school is even about. They have not been read to and have low oral language. Those sorts of things make it more difficult to get a head start at school, because those basics have not been learnt at home, for whatever reason.

I think when you put those children into a play-based learning environment but do not deliberately teach them how to handwrite, how to write their name, how to count, how to do all of those basic concrete things that children need in reading, writing and mathematics, then you put them at a huge disadvantage because school is the only place they are going to learn those things. If school is given over to a more open, find-your-own-way kind of inquiry base, I think that is really difficult. If you cannot read, write, do maths and speak with a level of vocab, then inquiring into what you might want to learn is very difficult because you have a very limited based to work with.

**MR DAVIS:** That makes sense. That leads me to my next question around open learning—or, to use your term, bubble-based learning—depending on the age cohort. Do you think it is important to prioritise single classroom learning for younger students but that there are opportunities, or even benefits, from open-plan learning or collaborative-based teaching in the more senior and secondary years?

**Ms Taylor:** Yes. It is probably a bit of a sandwich at either end, if you like. If you think about early childhood, children in preschool, then a collaborative learning environment is a great place for them because they are learning social interactions and how you play alongside people and that sort of thing. That might go through into the first year of school. I think those more open-plan environments work well from age two to five.

**MR DAVIS:** I see.

**Ms Taylor:** Then you are looking into a more structured reading, writing and mathematics base, which we know children must have. From six years old there is that more formal education, with deliberate acts of teaching. They are much better in quiet, small, non-distractable classrooms, where children are all doing the same thing at the same time and can really concentrate on what is happening. I think that would go through until the end of primary. We have intermediate schools, so maybe it could go to age 13.

I think once children have got a really strong core in the basics of reading, writing and mathematics then from 13 or 14 you can start inquiring into the world around you. You can start using your reading, writing and maths ability to look at: “What do we think about climate change? What do we think about whatever things we are inquiring into in the world?” You have a place to work from and you have a level of literacy and numeracy that gives you the capability to do that. Open-plan spaces and collaborative environments would maybe lend themselves to children aged 13-plus, when they can self-manage better.

**MR DAVIS:** That makes sense. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** We have spent a fair bit of time talking about classroom design. I am hoping to expand the conversation to your school. What is the best part of your school campus? I know the easy answer is the teachers and the kids. In terms of the built form of the school, what is the part of the school that you are most proud of and that you would like to see emulated in other schools?

**Ms Taylor:** I think the new classrooms that we have got. It was more luck than planning, to be honest. The new classroom spaces opened in 2021. There are six of them. They are double rooms, but they have a soundproof glass door, which we keep shut at the moment. They have the ability to be open spaces for children if you want them to be.

The sliding glass door gives them light. It makes them feel like they are bigger rooms because the children can see into the other room. The other thing is that they are acoustically really good. I think that is a really important thing in classrooms where you have got 25 primary age children. The acoustics are hugely important. I think those rooms are really good. When you go in, they feel calm, they feel quiet and the colours on the walls are muted and natural. There is no sensory overload for kids in the room.

**THE CHAIR:** In regard to recreation spaces on your school campus—ovals, courtyards and maybe breakout spaces—are there any that you think your school has done particularly well?

**Ms Taylor:** I do not think we have any really good ones at the moment. We have got some planned. We were just meeting yesterday to look at the number of trees in the grounds. The landscape designer we were working with was saying that if you can get 40 per cent cover on your grounds you start to mitigate climate challenges. We are really looking at planting lots more trees. We are looking at what we call in New Zealand Mara kai—edible gardens where the children understand about growing their own food but also what is available to them. The trees that are planted are not only natives but also fruit trees. Our next shift is to look at outdoor spaces that can be outdoor classrooms.

**THE CHAIR:** You mentioned that you are in the process of trying to improve these places. How do you consult with your school community about what these spaces should look like?

**Ms Taylor:** We have done quite a bit of consultation around that. We got a landscape gardener to draw up a plan of what we thought might work. We put that out to the community and got them to comment on it. We take feedback from our community. We have a really engaged community, which is a treasure for us. People will tell us exactly what they think. That is great.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**MR DAVIS:** Ms Taylor, I am interested in how your school interacts with the



community around it—in particular, community sports groups, who I imagine have an interest in using your facilities. Could you give me a better understanding about how, if at all, the local community and, in particular, community sport were consulted on the design of your new schools and how they are encouraged or enabled to use some of those facilities when the school is not using them?

**Ms Taylor:** We are very fortunate that the location of the school is in the middle of almost a little village. We have a huge supermarket up the road from us. We have lots of little shops. We are right in the middle of the community. The grounds are open the whole time when the kids are not here. The grounds are locked during the day, between nine and three, to keep the children locked in because we are right near a railway line. But between three and nine the next morning the grounds are open.

We have lots of groups that use the grounds in the morning for bootcamp, fitness and that sort of thing. Lots of sports use the grounds, like football and those sorts of sports. We are really fortunate in that we are one of the few schools in New Zealand left that still has a swimming pool. Swimming pools have become increasingly expensive to maintain and many schools have given up on them.

We have got an indoor heated swimming pool which we would not be able to run if we didn't formally lease it to a business. The swimming pool is owned by the Ministry of Education, but we lease the use of it to a swim school and we buy back the swim lessons from the swim school, which means that they take care of it. The pool is heated to 33 degrees through the winter and the kids go swimming every week. They have lessons every week. That partnership with a local business has meant we can keep the pool. The hall is used a lot for things like taekwondo classes, and at weekends by various sports groups. The grounds and the facilities are used by the community all the time.

**MR DAVIS:** With the hall, I am particularly interested in how you manage really practical things. How do you manage access? How do you manage hiring? Is it in the spirit of reciprocity: they provide a service to your community and so you let them in, or is it a revenue opportunity for the school, in the hall in particular?

**Ms Taylor:** Yes, it is a revenue opportunity. It would depend on the group. If it were a group that was hiring the hall for a one-off community event, we would, in the spirit of community, let them use the hall. But if it is a regular group where people are paying for lessons, like taekwondo lessons, then it is a business. We have a before and after school care program, which the YMCA run. We have a pod agreement with them. As it is a Ministry of Education building, we have an agreement that the YMCA can use it for before and after school care on an ongoing, three-year lease. They pay us for the lease, even though the Ministry of Education own the building, and they run their business from it. We have that with the swim school and we have that with the YMCA. For anyone outside of the YMCA's hours, we charge them term by term fees for leasing the hall from us.

**MR DAVIS:** Okay. How does demand compare with capacity in terms of the school's ability to meet the demand from these community groups—sports groups in particular—for the facilities you have?

**Ms Taylor:** It is absolutely jam-packed all the time. We could build three halls and we would still have them full.

**MR DAVIS:** I wonder if anyone from the New Zealand Ministry of Education is listening. In your autonomous school model, which is very similar to the model in ACT schools, where the revenue you raise goes back into educational opportunities for young people, if the ministry built you two more halls, for example, would that be something that you would welcome and would that have a benefit for your ability to provide educational programs as a revenue opportunity?

**Ms Taylor:** That would be a dream come true. It really would be. The interesting thing in New Zealand is that quite a few smaller schools do not have a hall. There is no requirement for them to have a hall, which is a real shame. Smaller schools are always trying to fundraise to try to build a hall because it is not necessarily something that the Ministry of Education would build. It is the same for swimming pools. So the chances of getting another hall would be, I think, zero.

**MR DAVIS:** Okay. Good to know. Thanks, Ms Taylor.

**THE CHAIR:** It seems like there was a change in government policy at some point with regard to school infrastructure. When did New Zealand stop building swimming pools and school halls? Is that a recent thing?

**Ms Taylor:** No. It has been a little while. In the 18 years that I have been a principal, not many schools have had those things built. If they are brand-new schools, they will have a hall built; they will not have a pool, but they will have a hall built. If they are an older school that needs a hall replaced or did not have one in the beginning, they really are struggling to get it built.

**THE CHAIR:** Wow.

**MR DAVIS:** I feel like I could keep asking about community sports facilities. What do you charge? How do you determine the cost? Further, how do you manage that in your school? Do you have a staff member whose job it is to manage these contracts? How is that practically arranged?

**Ms Taylor:** We negotiate with each individual person who wishes to use the facilities on what they would use it for and how long they want it for. We have a pro forma price list. I cannot remember off the top of my head what it is. It is different for each. If it is a one-off hiring for one evening, that is much higher than an ongoing school term rent. We have a person who works in our school office who is in charge of all the hiring of everything around the school.

**MR DAVIS:** Okay.

**Ms Taylor:** We work with individual contracts. For example, they are different time frames. Our swimming pool agreement is for three years. Our YMCA before and after school care arrangements are for three years. They are properly arranged with the Ministry of Education, which has to sign off as well. If it is a long-term lease, because it is a Ministry of Education building, the Ministry of Education have to agree and

sign the document too. They are renewed every three years. If it is a sports club then that would be a yearly agreement between the board, effectively the CEO, and the group itself. We set a fee around that one.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Taylor, in the last minute or two, is there anything you think we have missed?

**Ms Taylor:** The other thing that I have not talked about—I do not know whether it is something that is coming up for you guys, but certainly it has been on our timetable and on our minds in New Zealand—is having culturally responsive spaces, as well as making sure that classrooms are responsive in terms of the resources and the context that we teach through, and that they are not Eurocentric in their approach.

For example, for children in years 0 and 1, we will do a bit of a switch to make sure that the play equipment is not all Eurocentric in nature and that it has Te Ao Maori context. We have a large number of Indian students and a large number of Chinese students. We want to make sure that we are addressing those cultures in the classroom so that the space does not reflect the culture of the teacher but the school itself reflects the various cultures of the people in the room.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you, Ms Taylor. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. You have not taken any questions on notice, so we do not need to worry about that part. Thank you for joining us.

**Ms Taylor:** Thank you very much.

**BIR SETHI, MRS KIRAN**, Founder and Director, The Riverside Education Foundation

**THE CHAIR:** We now welcome Mrs Bir Sethi. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today. Do you have any additional comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** I am also the founder and director of Design For Change. I am super honoured to be here and to present what we discussed when the team came to the Riverside School earlier in the year.

**THE CHAIR:** I would like to remind all witnesses today of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw attention to the privilege statement that has been provided to them. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Could you please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** I agree.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. Could you please tell the committee why you established Riverside School?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** I am actually a designer by profession. I graduated from the premier design college in India and had no plans of being education minded. I was super excited to be running my design firm, and then I became a mother. When my son went to school at all of six years, I witnessed, firsthand, an education system that rewards compliance over conversation, and works on control over cocreation.

In three months, I realised how easily and how insidiously the education system got my son to believe he did not have an identity and he did not have a name, and there was pretty much no purpose. I took my son out of school and used the design-thinking process to understand that there must be a different way to educate our children. I started the school in my home first and now it has been 22 years since that moment.

**THE CHAIR:** Wow! How did your experience as a designer shape the educational experience you provided?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** I was just listening to the previous speaker. So much of the education system, especially in India and now across the world, works on designing for children and not with. We sit in these rooms and we make policies for the user. The design process is a pretty fundamental tool that says you have to design it with the user. Starting Riverside was a massive opportunity to bring the user into the room. I remember that my first age group, when I started, was six-year-olds. So much of the filtering in education is about age—“They are too young. Let us wait until they are older”—or gender—“Girls get other opportunities to boys”—and demographics. We talk about where children come from.

Challenging these filters about how education is designed allowed us to build the

program from ground up, which really made the student a co-creator, a co-designer, of the learning process. Subsequently, over the years, we activated a lot, we got the stories in and we created and designed processes, with them—whether it was with the parents, with the teachers or with the children—and codified processes to make it a systems approach. Design helped me look at schools as eco-systems and in nonlinear ways. Codification became a massive opportunity to retain and build culture. We have that problem in education. We work in cycles of leadership; we do not really work in cycles of wisdom. For me, that was a great learning.

**THE CHAIR:** Can you paint me a word picture of what a regular day looks like at Riverside School? When I was at school, I filed into my classroom, we sat in neat rows and we looked at the blackboard. We had very structured lessons: maths for one hour and English for one hour. How is that different in your school?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** I like that you have talked about the timetable being the artefact of conscience. We do not look at the timetable as an artefact of conscience. So much of the work is about, “Let us talk about potential; let us do all that,” but the timetable finally either elevates that or reduces it. I would say the timetable was our grandest reimagination, and it was process driven. If we had to promise to make sure that children’s hearts, minds and bodies were part of it, it had to be reflected in the timetable. It is exactly as you say—we create the timetable for relevance and relationships and rigour.

You walk in and the first thing is addressing the heart. We have something called the Conglom, which is a way to get children’s hearts ready for learning. It is a moment for relationships. We slow the day down, we talk to them, we engage with them, and we get them to take the lead in what their day looks like. It is followed by them crafting the agenda. While it might look oh-so-personalised, it is not really. It is really a collaborative exercise in choosing and saying, “What should the elements of the day be that really make the learning come alive?” Once that is there, then they go into the learning moments, and, again, every 15 minutes is crafted for relevance, relationships and reflection. That we again reimagine: what are those 15 minutes looking like?

It cannot just be like you said—“Open the textbook and copy what you see on the board”—and the second teacher comes in or the third teacher comes in. The idea is to close that loop of learning. In between, we have something called “surplus”, which is essentially getting children to recognise that, every day, you can leave the day a little better, with a little bit of surplus, not a deficit—like cleaning up the bathrooms, saying gratitude over lunch or making sure the buses are fine. At the end of the day, we do a reflective practice to say, “Did we achieve what we set out to do at the beginning of the day?” If you look at just a single day and look at it as a mandala which flowers, then you know how you craft every week and then every month and then every year.

The biggest work we have done is reimaging a curriculum or a timetable that reflects the promise of what Riverside is: our children must become humane citizens who graduate with an “I can” mindset, an ability to be aware of the world, and enabled with the skills to make it a little better for somebody else.

**THE CHAIR:** You mentioned that the school first started in your home and now it has moved to a new site. As someone trying—

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** No, actually it is at the same campus. My school still serves as part of the school, but we have built the buildings on the land. I still live right in the middle of the school.

**THE CHAIR:** Wow! What was the process of trying to gather funds to build these new facilities?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** We broke even in the seventh year. The land was mine. I did not take anything for the land. For the building, we had one parent who was a great believer and the first loan came from him. Subsequently, the other two buildings for each key stage of development—the early years, the primary, and the high school—were built, sometimes taking a loan or sometimes just repurposing the money that we had.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. That is very interesting.

**MR DAVIS:** One of the issues we are grappling with across Australia is recruiting and retaining a suitably qualified teaching workforce. Relative to Australian schools, your built environment is unconventional, the curriculum is unconventional, and even the timetable that you have just articulated for us is very different to that of a standard Australian school. How have you managed to recruit and retain a workforce for your environment that not only is interested in this sort of educational program but also is suitably qualified to deliver it?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** When I started, I had only pre-kindergarten, kindergarten 1 and 2, and grade 1. I had those four classes and all of 26 children, and I had cohort of five. I had the luxury of time on my hands. I built it a year at a time. We reached our highest when the children graduated in 10 years. What was important was that story of slowing down and getting two teachers to join. That meant that culture was very strong. We built a team that believed and that were actually building this program.

When your teachers believe in and build a program, they have a sense of ownership, rather than just somebody saying, “Follow what I am telling you.” Over the years, learning from this insight of ownership and accountability, meant that we created processes for the personal and professional development of our team that meant that, no matter how you came in, it is our responsibility to make you who you want to be. That means we spend over 200 days in personal and professional development. That is another way to look at it: right from the morning, that is personal development. We do not account for the little moments that make somebody feel valued. Then, of course, there are the serious professional development moments—the travel and the training. All that happens.

We work around 206 days a year for the children and 250 days a year for the teachers. We have those times when we stay back and there are no children around and we build a vision again. We invite new teachers to on board them. It is a really serious moment of investment in the team. That means that, today, I have 430 children in my school and I have a team of around 70, but 50 per cent of them have been with me for over 20 years, right from the time I started. Another 20 per cent have been with me for more than, I would say, 12 years. You then need to have fresh minds who come for two years, like a fellowship, and build a little bit of energy in the team. That has been

the amount of investment and time we have put aside for personal development.

Now, of course, Riverside is considered a brand, so we get people from across the world who want to work with us. We have the Teach For All network bringing people regularly to work with us. We have interns that come in. We have people who are willing to make that time.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you. How do you include your teaching staff and your broader workforce in the design and development of the school's infrastructure? How much autonomy and self-determination do they have in the kind of built environment that they work in?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** It was more the children who became the clients for the architect.

**MR DAVIS:** I see.

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** In fact, very interesting insights came from the kids with the first building that we built for early learners. That meant there was a bathroom in every room, because we wanted to make it like a home. That is the first time at school, so we mimicked a lot of the things that we had learnt from my house, which where we started, and then built it. There was a more intimate feeling. It felt like a home. There were little outdoor areas and we had cubby holes for the children. I remember very distinctly, when thinking of the middle years, we had got used to thinking, "It worked in the primary years." We could have just replicated those ideas, but we did not do that, because when we called the children in to speak with the architect, they were very clear that they wanted movement. They wanted to leave the rooms and have more flexible movement, and that meant the bathroom block was put outside, they had their own individual tables, and they had little outdoor places where they could move in and out. Movement became a great reason for that.

There is the older years building, and I remember that they wanted transparency and safety. It is a big piece that we forget. The idea of transparency meant that the emotional wellbeing of children was taken care of far more, because the moment they have transparency they feel seen—children are seen and they are heard, and they not tucked away in corners where a child may be bullied or neglected. Those are some interesting words that came up.

The other word that came up was "community", so there are places in the school where everybody congregates. It is like the village square. We have a community space where everybody can come and there are little brick huts spaced across the school for the smaller, intimate moments. They are called gazebos, and we have a Zen gazebo. We have beautiful trees on campus. We planted around 120 trees that would bring birds to the campus. We have all become mini-ornithologists. We have identified 30 species of birds that come in. It becomes an eco-system. Kids see themselves as not just consumers of this place but as caretakers of the school. These all become the subversive curriculum that you build—you build a space and it becomes a teacher.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** We have spent a lot of time focusing on your practices within the school and a bit on the school building itself. How do you integrate your school with the wider community?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** I do not know how much you know about the school, but in 2007 Riverside started a city initiative to make cities child-friendly. It came from a conversation that happened with one of my first batch of 12-year-olds, who said, “When we go back, our parents do not let us go out to play.” I spent all my time growing up in India playing on the streets—playing outside. That became a real awakening: how are our cities designed for children and childhood? The children became a team and we walked to the municipality, we talked to the traffic police, we talked to industries and management and design colleges, and said, “How does a city make a child feel safe?”

That became an idea we started 15 years ago called AProCh, which stands for a Protagonist in every Child. It basically closes down the busiest street for traffic five times a year and makes it a playground for children. That was started by Riverside. Then we took over the parks. We said, “The parks are there; children are not coming to the parks,” because they were not allowed to play cricket and they were not allowed to play games in the park, because it became just a walking space. How do you reimagine parks? How do you reimagine multiplexes where children from the streets would have a cinema experience once a month? All of these initiatives became a way to say, “How can schools become lighthouses for community—not just serving children who are coming inside but serving for the larger good”?

In 2009, I started Design for Change, which is taking the same design process with which we crafted Riverside to not only India but the world. This is an opportunity to get children to believe that they can make their world a better place with a formal framework: feel, imagine, do and share. We are now in 66 countries. We have reached over 2 million children. It all started from here: how do you not only be the best school in the world but the best school for the world, and how do you reach out?

Subsequently, the Riverside Learning Centre was one of the conversations we had with the honourable minister about leadership training. I have realised that maverick teachers do not change the school system; it is school leaders. They can become either bridges or barriers for change. For me, leadership became a massive opportunity to get them to see their schools as systems. That has really been the last 22 years.

**THE CHAIR:** Just circling back, you mentioned that one of the major roads was closed down to allow children to play on it. Could you provide a bit more detail as to what the objective of that was?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** Roads are typically seen with citizens that are on the move—traffic. To give a metaphor for closing down the busiest street, which is called the Law Garden street in Ahmedabad, the city was willing to give space. It is an important message for children. Finally, you get the child to be a citizen. Finally, the child becomes a citizen and will look after the city. It was an opportunity, and it is completely free. It is totally open sourced. You have children interacting with each other—a little child who comes from a little government school chats to someone in an international school—and the parents and hawkers on the street. It is such a place



of community. Children play games, there is dance happening on the street, they are having cultural events, and they are drawing on the street. We have designed the first ever child-friendly zebra crossing to make the child visible to people.

For us, closing down that street meant community interaction. It meant the traffic police partnering with us, it meant the municipality giving us light and sound and a stage, and it meant the citizens becoming volunteers on the street. It really became a city initiative. For the three hours that we closed the street down, everybody was part of this beautiful thing. When the cricket match is on, we put up a screen and everybody is on the street having the sense of community. It is important to have those moments, because most cities are not designed for slowing down and closing off places, especially for children.

**THE CHAIR:** There is a lot of ageing infrastructure here in the ACT when it comes to our schools. What advice would you give to a government as it sets about doing the work of upgrading some of our ageing buildings?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** I am not quite sure whether adding more works. I think it is about reimagining spaces for things like emotional safety. I would say, wherever possible, break down those barriers. At Riverside, we do not have a staff room. We do not have a principal's cabin. I can sit under a tree and make that my office. I think visibility and approachability are key ingredients for getting children to have a sense of community. Words like "transparency" are key factors when we are reimagining. Even with what I would call hot and cold spaces—most bathrooms in buildings are tucked away in corners where there is no light and you do not have safety—I would reimagine those places to be visible in the middle of schools where there is a sense of safety for children.

The reason I share this is that, through Design for Change, we have 30,000 solutions from children across the world, and the one thing that bothers them the most that they are talking about is bullying in schools. It comes from four places. It comes from the traffic—that means in buses—because they are unattended; playgrounds, because they are at the corners of school buildings so there is no attendance; the bathrooms of schools; and the corridors of schools. They say, "These are primarily places where I might get bullied." If bullying is happening, they are less likely to be engaged in learning, because they are constantly scared. They say, "I am going to go walk to my class and that boy is going to be there and meet me at the bathroom again, so I cannot learn."

While we speak a lot about learning, we must understand that it is the heart that leads the mind. If those words can be part of the reimagining of the design, I think that would be wonderful.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful.

**MR DAVIS:** I am interested in the program that you run, where you let your young people experience a child being exploited—child labour. My instinctive reaction to that is that I can see all the learning opportunities, but my mind goes straight to the parent community that might be resistant, particularly a parent community that wants their kids to go to school to learn how to read, write and count and not necessarily

engage in other things outside of that. How have you managed to secure buy-in from your parent community? And what kind of feedback have you had from your parent community about these sorts of programs?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** I like that you mention that. Riverside does not have an either/or situation. In fact, just yesterday, we got our benchmarking results that we do with schools across India. The Riverside children outperformed the top tier schools in India in maths, science and English. So this is not an either/or situation. It is not building character or building content; it is both. Because we have been able to demonstrate that, by virtue of having these kinds of experiences to build a sense of character and to build the idea of engagement and awareness of the world, the children read more, they engage more and they speak more. So much of it demands them to engage with real-world opportunities not just be tucked away inside the walls of a school.

We took the first benchmarking test in the first four years—so the children must have been aged eight and nine—and, since then, we have systematically shown the results. With parents, having that taken care of so that that is not one of their concerns, now they are coming to us for this particular program and this approach, saying, “We want our children to graduate believing they can make the world a better place.” Otherwise why run a school?

I think we have been able to demonstrate that it is not an either/or situation. We pretty much work the same number of days as every other school in India. It is not that we are working extra or that there are extra hours. We are the same on a number of data points—the number of hours we spend, the numbers of days we spend—as most schools across India, and then we are achieving these results as well. Riverside, as you can see from the website, is a globally recognised and honoured space. But that has come from not veering away from parental pressure but a partnership. Like I said, we had the luxury of growing slowly. That meant the parents got into the program, they became partners of the program, and now they have become the evangelists of the program.

It is about that cycle of taking it slow, investing in them and having them engage with us in terms of these conversations. The reason I say this is that, when COVID happened, there was a big push-back in India regarding cutting the fees of most schools. They said, “We had to cut the fees because parents cannot support it.” Not a single parent said that. They said, “You do you. Make sure that you continue with that. We are there with you, 100 per cent.” To me, it was because of the years of investment and getting them to be partners and collaborators for the program.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you so much.

**THE CHAIR:** Before we finish, is there anything that you think we have missed?

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** Yes—to help you to understand Design for Change for your schools. I understand you have 1,260 schools in Queensland. I would love it and be deeply honoured if Design for Change, which is a totally free program but really equips children with the tools to make their world a better place, could be introduced to them and they could be part of the global community of change-makers. That would be absolutely fabulous. If, in any way, you could make that possible, I would be deeply

grateful.

**THE CHAIR:** That is great. We appreciate your enthusiasm and we will definitely consider it.

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** Thank you very much.

**THE CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for your attendance today.

**Mrs Bir Sethi:** Thank you very much. If you ever come to India, do drop in.

**THE CHAIR:** Will do.

**MR DAVIS:** Will do. Thank you.

**Short suspension.**

**JUDGE, MR PATRICK**, Branch Secretary, ACT Branch, Australian Education Union

**HENNESSY, DR BIANCA**, Research and Policy Officer, ACT Branch, Australian Education Union

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Would you please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

**Mr Judge:** Yes.

**Dr Hennessy:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. You do not have an opening statement, so we will proceed straight to questions. I was hoping you could provide the committee with some examples of school infrastructure that you think are being done well in the ACT and pieces of school infrastructure that maybe need a bit of improvement.

**Mr Judge:** Yes; absolutely. In terms of some real success stories, the more recently developed and renovated school buildings are really of a very high standard. We are talking here about Throsby School or the renovations to Belconnen High School or Amaroo School. The thing that stands out for us is that they are buildings that have clearly been developed in consultation with teachers and school staff, with the purpose of the space in mind. Of course, because they are new, they are in good repair. They are fit for purpose. They meet all of the standards they need to meet. They are constructed of high quality materials. They are the sorts of spaces that our members would all like to be working in. Did you want to provide any other examples or have I covered that off?

**Dr Hennessy:** I think you have covered that off.

**Mr Judge:** Some of the issues that we see with infrastructure that could be improved are particularly in some of our older school sites. This stands to reason. We are not teaching now in the same way that we were when a lot of these schools were built, so they do not fit the needs of the current teaching workforce or the current way that we teach in the ACT. Perhaps more importantly—and it is a big issue for the future of education in the ACT—we struggle in a lot of those spaces to provide an inclusive environment. They were not built with the inclusion of all of the students who should be included in mind. There is a need for some upgrades there to make sure that we are doing all of the things that we have an obligation to do for our young people.

**THE CHAIR:** One of your recommendations is that we centralise building services. Why are you making that recommendation?

**Mr Judge:** We are pleased that there are already some steps in that direction, as a

result of enterprise bargaining on the schoolteachers agreement and some other agreements. The centralising of building services is, I think, an obvious step. It is about what we want schools to be spending their time focused on, which is teaching and learning. We do not want them to be spending their time—and we are talking here particularly about school principals and school leadership teams—worrying about infrastructure upgrades and building services. These are all things they should be consulted about, but they should not be their responsibility. The way we see it, it is a better investment of the ACT's money that goes into public education if building services are provided to schools as a service, not handed off to schools as a responsibility.

**THE CHAIR:** That is great. Thank you.

**MR DAVIS:** You would be aware that the government has both the Secure Local Jobs Code and its own insourcing framework, which, to summarise, largely says that people providing work to the government should be full time, on good pay and conditions. Would that recommendation, as you understand it, be honouring the commitments under both the Secure Local Jobs Code and the insourcing framework?

**Mr Judge:** Sorry; could you run that by me again?

**MR DAVIS:** Your pitch today is that we should be taking the burden off school communities to manage assets and that it should be directorate-led by building services staff that are on good pay and conditions, employed by the directorate. Would doing that, as you understand it, be honouring commitments to both the Secure Local Jobs Code and the government's own insourcing framework?

**Mr Judge:** Absolutely. We have had issues in the past, which the ACT government took steps to resolve, around the employment conditions of school cleaners, for example. That was of mutual benefit. Although the school cleaning services are not perfect, and we are not going to suggest that they are, it is at least valuable for our members to be able to have a more direct relationship with the provider of those cleaning services. Also, it is of benefit to the workers who are doing that cleaning service that they are employed by a best practice employer in the ACT government.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you. I want to touch on recommendation 2, which is around equity across the public school system. I am going to start with a story that I tell a lot, and then I want a bit of your feedback. The committee had a previous inquiry into school infrastructure and maintenance. We visited a lot of ACT public schools in different parts of the city, with difference sized P&Cs who had different levels of capacity and interest.

We visited older public schools built around similar ages. We saw some schools with new playgrounds, new shading, new asphalt and we saw other schools using shipping containers for storage. The difference, as I observed it, was the capacity within their P&Cs. In the example of the former, that was because the P&Cs wrote grant applications and received funding from different parts of government for these different programs, like a community garden and such.

How much responsibility do you think the directorate has to have some sort of

understanding of those inequities and to balance out those inequities to make sure that those schools with the less active parent community, or less active P&C, are not missing out on infrastructure spends?

**Mr Judge:** From a principle perspective, we believe that the quality of the education you receive and the quality of the setting in which you receive it should not be dictated by the means of somebody's parents to contribute. It is frustrating for us to see that, even in our public school system, it is sometimes the case that there are wide gulfs between the haves and the have nots, in terms of what their school is able to afford. That can be due to matters such as that direct financial contribution, and whether parents have the means to provide that, but it can also be about time. It is unfortunate that there is likely to be a direct correlation between parents who are time poor because they work shiftwork jobs, or similar, and also not having the financial means to contribute. So they have neither the time nor the money.

We would really prefer to see the ACT government following the sort of model that has been commenced in New Zealand, where the government takes some responsibility for levelling the playing field and stepping in to provide some of those contributions to schools, and particularly those schools in lower socio-economic areas.

**MR DAVIS:** I am playing devil's advocate here. I have had it put to me that voluntary contributions should be centralised and distributed based on need. I have conversely had it put to me that if you did that you would see a reduction in voluntary contributions because parents want to give money to their child's school. Would you have a view on a centralised bucket with which to equitably distribute funds collected through voluntary contributions? Do you see some of the same risks that have been put to me: that that might see a reduction in the amount voluntarily contributed?

**Mr Judge:** I think this is an area where there is another way, which is to follow that New Zealand model. In some cases schools will opt in to having centralised voluntary contributions or receiving a contribution direct from government. In other cases, where schools believe, usually with good reason, that they will beat the contribution that they would get from the government by default, they go out and seek those voluntary contributions from their community.

We started out with a statement of principle here that the resources available should not be dictated by the means of somebody's parents. We would stand by that. But it is also the case that we would not want to see the risk that we have even less money, as a result, going into some of our schools. If people want to make a reasonable contribution to their child's school, we can understand on some level why they might want to make it to that particular school. But the principle that the government should apply is one that seeks to equalise that across the territory.

**MR DAVIS:** My last follow-up is the example that you have included in your submission of a P&C describing the process that you have to go through to invest in what it would describe as essential infrastructure investments, including sausage sizzles and cake stalls, to pay for landscaping features which should be fundamental to school environments. I appreciate that, in the interests of brevity, you have included one example from a P&C. In your experience, and from feedback from your members, how common is it for schools to be relying on the volunteer contributions of their

parents to fund essential infrastructure investments?

**Mr Judge:** It should not happen at all; that is the short answer to that. There should be no need for these sorts of contributions to be made, as we were just talking about. We should not be relying on school communities to make voluntary contributions to our public education system. As a matter of principle, we should not be seeing this sort of thing happening at all. There should be a really clear program of capital works and capital upgrades from the ACT government that targets these areas of need so that schools do not have to run these sorts of things. It would be wonderful if our public schools were running fetes or sausage sizzles, or whatever it is, as a pure community event and were not trying to use those opportunities to do what is, frankly, the government's job: to fund public schools.

**MR DAVIS:** To that point, Mr Judge, would it be the union's view that there is not currently a clear, long-term capital works program for infrastructure in our public schools?

**Mr Judge:** We are not aware of one.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** What are some of the IT challenges that teachers face in schools right now?

**Dr Hennessy:** How long have you got?

**THE CHAIR:** Twelve minutes.

**Dr Hennessy:** Our members describe lots of challenges with IT. They range from things that appear pretty simple to fix, like relief teachers getting a device to use on the day that they are teaching in a school, through to more systemic problems like the proliferation of various platforms that they need to interact with on a daily basis, having to enter data into multiple different platforms to communicate essentially the same information to reach different parts of the Education Directorate.

It is about hardware provision and software provision. It is also about, when new systems are introduced, there being a system of proper consultation to make sure that what is introduced is fit for purpose and meets a need, rather than just being the newest thing. Also, there needs to be an appropriate workload analysis when introducing something new. This topic comes up at every single branch council and branch executive meeting we have. It is a constant issue for our members.

**THE CHAIR:** So we have got enough physical devices. There are enough laptops, there are enough smart screens, but the support required for all of those to work functionally is not being provided?

**Mr Judge:** It is a deeper problem than that. If we are talking about the hardware devices that are provided to schools and school staff, it goes to whether those devices are appropriate and whether there are a sufficient number of them to factor in redundancies. It goes to how that is funded. There is no clarity about whether schools

are responsible for providing an extra 10 per cent of devices, to provide that redundancy out of their own budgets, or whether that is something that comes from the central budget.

It is not clear to us how a casual relief teacher can be provided with a device, despite the commitment to do so, unless they have a longstanding relationship with the school, where it is known that they will keep coming back. When they are provided with those devices, they are often provided with a student device, which is not appropriate. It is about the provision of the basic tools to do the job. It is not the 1990s anymore. We require those hardware devices to do our jobs. It is not up to scratch. There are still gaps and there really ought not to be.

We do not want to be making it any harder, particularly when a relief teacher turns up to a school. We want for them to just turn up and do their job. Already, they are turning up and having to get to grips with a group of students. They do not know the individual support plans for those students, or whatever processes, protocols and policies there are around the school. To then have to be their own IT support officer and to find the best device that they can make available to themselves is not really acceptable.

If we go, as well, to the question of software, it is a constant problem for our members that they have systems that are not fit for purpose. They are replaced by other systems that are not fit for purpose. I do not want to suggest that it is easy to create systems to do the sorts of things that our schools need them to do, but I think we can do better than the sorts of systems we have. To provide a really clear example of that, the systems for reporting incidents involving students and safety incidents involving staff do not talk to each other. There is a duplication of work that would be easily resolved by having one system or, alternatively, something that speaks to both of those systems in relation to those incidents. That is a problem that we have known about for some years now. It remains unresolved.

Doing those sorts of things to make people's jobs easier will help. But it is not just about workload; it is about quality. It is about making sure that it is easy to log these things so that we have the data about what is happening with our students, so that we know about the incidents that have happened for our staff and so that we can join all of these things together and create a picture of what is happening for someone who perhaps cannot be in the classroom every day, watching what is going on, whether it is a school principal or someone in the education support office. Getting these systems right is really important, and making them easy to use will make it more likely that people will use them.

**MR DAVIS:** Dr Hennessy, you say that this is brought up regularly and, by the sounds of it, it has been for a substantial period of time. I assume that does not happen in echo chamber. The union feeds this back to the employer and says, "This is what our members are saying." What do you identify as the resistance to change? You have been saying for a long time that this is impacting your members. It has clearly reached a point where it occupies a lot of time and conversation. It might seem like the obvious, simple question: what are you being told is the reason that this problem cannot be fixed?



**Dr Hennessy:** I do not know. Patrick, do you know the answer to that question?

**Mr Judge:** I do not think it is the case that we are being told the problem cannot be fixed. But it is absolutely the case that these are difficult problems to fix. As we suggested in our submission, there is an important role for procurement here, and good procurement practices. If we are getting it right in the first place, we do not have to identify a whole series of issues that we then have to fix. That would be the ideal state for things to be in. We are in the position now with a system that has just been rolled out, Kronos, which is causing problems for our schools and for our casual teacher members.

It is about making sure that we get it right in the first place, and making sure that training is provided to staff and that they are well versed in using the systems before they are rolled out—all those sorts of things. It is about providing additional resourcing to support the rollout of these systems. Those are all really important at the front end. The alternative is that we get to where we are, where we have some systems that were very expensive and very complicated and they do not work to do the things that we want them to do.

**MR DAVIS:** This relates to a point you raised before, Dr Hennessy. It sounds like the casual staff are particularly challenged by some of these ICT issues. I know that recommendation 8 of the Teacher Shortage Taskforce report was to encourage the use of in-built relief teachers in all schools, to support schools to manage teacher absences. Would it be your expectation that, once that recommendation is enacted, those in-built relief staff would be onboarded and supported like a permanent staff member, with the appropriate ICT equipment from day one?

**Dr Hennessy:** Yes. It would relieve a lot of the issues associated with having to equip someone very quickly, first thing in the morning, before they go to class. If they are there every day, you would expect that they would have a device that they would use every day and they would be familiar with whatever internal systems the school uses and expectations that staff have of each other. It would be very useful.

**Mr Judge:** I should add that the in-built relief is more of a model of staffing schools with some excess to make up for those times when you know you are not going to have sufficient staff to cover the classroom teaching hours. It is not necessarily different staff. We would expect, where schools have their in-built relief model, that those staff would be predominantly permanent staff or on long-term contracts at the school. They would have all of those devices that they need to be inducted.

**MR DAVIS:** That makes sense. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** With that, we are out of time. On behalf of the committee, thank you so much for being here today.

**Dr Hennessy:** Thanks.

**Mr Judge:** Thank you.

**LEIGH, MS GWENETH**, Academic and Consultant Landscape Architect,  
University of Canberra

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. I remind all witnesses today of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Could you please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

**Ms Leigh:** I understand, and I agree.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. You have no opening statement, so we will go straight to questions. Ms Leigh, why is it important to consult students on the design of their school spaces?

**Ms Leigh:** I think because they are probably the best authorities of these spaces. In the communications as part of my research I have been talking with designers and principals from around Australia. I have also been consulting with students themselves within Canberra. Overwhelmingly, the feedback I get is that, during the day, in classes, that is seen as adult time. That is seen as time that is structured by the structures themselves. When there is the opportunity to go outside for recess, lunch and sport, often the schoolyard is seen as the students' domain. It is where they can relax, let down their guard a bit and socialise with friends. As such, they are seen as authorities in how those spaces are used.

Much of the time, adults are the ones who are tasked to program and predict the needs of student users. Over the years, schoolyard spaces have not evolved at the same rate, in terms of following pedagogy and practice, as our school buildings. From talking with designers, practitioners and principals, they will all admit and agree that it has kind of been left behind. One designer I spoke with said the brief had not changed in 35 years. Given the climate that we live in today, with climate change and COVID, students are ready to take action. I think that these are spaces where we can start demonstrating to them what is possible. We can use them as educational spaces, not only in a formal sense but in a social sense.

A lot of students have growing issues of stress and anxiety. Often, when moving into environments that are designed for physical activity and recess predominantly, many students have said they are stressful. They do not like the echoing, the loud noises. A lot of female students find the kind of programming that has been put in place intimidating. As a result, many of them will go to the library; they will go indoors. At a time when we have physical activity levels that are quite low and we have issues with students not engaging with the outdoors or not feeling a connection with the outdoors and the benefits that derive from that, I think that is a missed opportunity to identify the other options that we can be using within these spaces.

**THE CHAIR:** I think it is a very salient point. When I think about my schools, growing up, there was an oval and a couple of courtyards with maybe a few benches

and a handball court.

**Ms Leigh:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** What is best practice these days? What do young people tell you that they want to see for these outdoor spaces?

**Ms Leigh:** I conducted an ideas competition exactly to find out what that is, because it is a very under-researched area. A lot of the students I talked with wanted areas of comfort, of beauty, that allowed them to feel a sense of value, a sense of worth. Right now, what you described is much of what is still delivered: handball courts, basketball courts and sporting ovals. If you are lucky, they will have some benches; maybe they will have some shade; in most cases, it is not there or else it is often seen as residual space.

I think what they do want are areas to gather, places where they can have agency to inform and manipulate some of the materials. This could be through gardening or looking after plants. Others in the ideas competition were looking at comfortable places, benches and pods where you could bring together multiple classes from the community to build a sense of safety and social opportunities. Some even said that they wanted their own spaces, safe spaces. That was emphasised to me by principals: the importance of having zones that were for particular year levels so that they felt they had a sense of community there but also what they called a cultural heart, a place where everybody felt connected and at ease, and a sense of belonging.

It is about providing variety and diversity, a different sense of textures and materials and a sense of passive safety and surveillance. An issue some schools had was that schools are often plonked in the middle of a great big open space. When you let the students out, there is a supervisory issue of trying to get instructors on site who can be there during recess and lunch breaks. That is often a constraint: a lot of schools have an enormous amount of space but they do not have the capacity to monitor it.

More innovations now are using the school to frame the space and have that become a natural edge. That way you not only have the benefit of having a sense of connection at a community level with what is across the road but have passive surveillance from within the classroom buildings themselves. The windows face onto these active central areas, so the urgency when you have corners you cannot supervise gets relieved a bit in that sense.

**THE CHAIR:** That is great.

**MR DAVIS:** Canberra is the fastest growing city in the country and we have finite space. One of the things that this inquiry has been reckoning with is vertical schools—building up, not out. We have visited some vertical schools interstate and we have seen with our own eyes some good examples and some not so good examples of that environment and being able to provide students with outdoor spaces. What are, in your research, some of the risks but also some of the opportunities in smaller footprint but higher schools? How can you integrate outdoor spaces and these student-led environments that you have been talking about in these kinds of buildings?

**Ms Leigh:** To be honest, vertical schools are something that fascinates me. I want to do more research into their impacts. I think the best example would be a principal I spoke in South Australia who had a very urban community that he needed to insert their school into. They did not have much access to open space around their particular area. But, in fact, he said it was an opportunity, in terms of how those students at the secondary level had the opportunity to integrate with the community. It had really become a communal space where students also had permission to engage with the surrounding areas, as well as being a community resource.

There is this interesting research going on, where schools are also becoming community hubs. There were several principals I talked to who said it was this overlap and this interface with communities, whether it was a road that also shared a schoolyard area or whether it was some of the shared open spaces surrounding it. It was about being more strategic in the placement of those schools and the access, and where you could rely on some of those open space needs. In fact, it created broader benefits; they could get more funding because it had these layers of use embedded within it.

I am concerned about vertical schools in terms of how students have access to open space during the day, how that is integrated. I think there are opportunities there. The solution is not to put in rubber soft fall and walls; it needs to have texture. I think there is a risk in some design development plans where we have to account for a certain amount of open space but what is counted is actually the sidewalks, the toilet block and the bike stands; it is not the engaging space—the spaces where students can actually interact and socialise. I think we have to be careful there in how we quantify it.

With the vertical schools it is also about measuring. That has been another aspect. How do we start building up the evidence to substantiate our design moves? I have to say that in the design field we are a bit lacking in that. It has been interesting, as part of my research, to pull on health and wellbeing tools to frame some of these questions. I have looked at ideas around what we call restorative spaces, which means how you can relieve mental fatigue and actually focus when you get those breaks. That is where some of my studies showed student wellbeing in the current environments plummeting, especially as they progress from the traditions of playground spaces to secondary spaces. It is not accommodating what they need.

In vertical schools we need to be more clever about having a diverse set of spaces, giving the students freedom and a kind of trust in where they can go and how that is accessed. I think there are opportunities with horizon. Horizon was something which came up quite a bit in student feedback: the idea of prospect and view and the relief that provided them when they were not in necessarily in a cohort that would engage in active sporting activities. For those that just wanted quiet spaces to reflect, the view was really important. In a vertical sense, that could be something that is seen as an opportunity. I have not done a deep dive into vertical schools, but I think they are needed. The evidence of the need to build up is warranted.

**MR DAVIS:** One of the things you have done quite well is talk to young people about their school environment. I would be interested in your advice to this committee, this Assembly and the government, about how best to engage with young people to talk

about the design of their schools. It is very easy to say, “We will do a survey,” or to put aside 20 minutes at the end of a class and roll out the butcher’s paper. What, in your opinion, is the best practice to engage students not just in the deliberative decision-making on what their school environment should look like but also on how to support them so that they are in a space to give their best answers and participate fully?

**Ms Leigh:** It may trace back to looking at the design guidelines and engagement processes there, and what is required. At the moment, when I talk with principals and designers about current standards of practice, there are very different silos. You have the health silo, in terms of student wellbeing and what we would like to deliver. You have the building silo, in terms of the practicalities for health and risk and safety issues. But what is missing is the engagement silo. I wonder whether in future projects there needs to be that engagement process, to have that recorded.

I wonder about creating some kind of committee. This is an idea that is in its nascency. I think there is, or there was, a committee of student representatives from around Canberra. Find ways to give them a project to give feedback on. Deliver it so that they can formalise their ideas somehow and submit those. I do not know whether there would be students who are consultants in that process, who engage, or whether it would be an ambassador within their school that gathers some of that feedback.

There was a great case study that you guys did down south side, which I studied. The students were so enthusiastic. I talked with them, and they were really encouraged and wanting to participate in those processes. But where things fell down was in the delivery. That is something which I think I am still trying to understand: what is possible? Often it is where the red tape is, where it becomes difficult in terms of the liability of the spaces that are desired.

I think it is probably about more consultation, bringing the students in from the beginning of the process, and even incorporating whether or not it is in the curriculum, whether or not there is an actual project that can be built within the school. I know that in the States there were some courses for construction, whether it is woodwork, whether it is looking at botany, and implementing some of these things within the schoolyards themselves. It is an area that needs exploring. I think we do that through engaging with the students first.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** I was hoping you could provide some comment through a gender lens. Who are schoolyards designed for?

**Ms Leigh:** Based on what I have researched and based on the outcome of some of the case studies I have looked at, some would say it is predominantly directed more towards male students, given the physical activity levels. That is certainly indicative in the results I got from the one case study I was measuring, where I had the chance to survey students. The female students, when they progressed from year 7 to year 10, showed that satisfaction within their schoolyards and their perceived wellbeing declined with each progressing year. It was most drastic for the female students in terms of their mental health.

There are a lot of compounding factors that would contribute to that. At present, the schoolyard is not seen as accessible to them. I had an exercise where students mapped out areas where they went during the school day. I also had them map out what they identify as quiet or what they identify as active, and what they identify as unsafe. I also had them go out and take pictures of areas that they enjoyed being in or did not. When I aligned all of those pieces of information it was interesting to see that the boys, when you asked them the areas that they did not like, said that it was predominantly because they found it boring or they found that they could not hang with their friends there. For the girls, a lot of it was because they did not feel safe. That was kind of what they were indicating.

I think we have a way to go to understand that a one-size-fits-all approach is not necessarily the answer in a lot of our schoolyards. You mentioned handball courts and sports fields. There is not a lot of opportunity for what I call slow speed socialising, where students just want to be able to have a chance to walk and go through different environments where they hang with their friends.

I had one principal tell me that he was approached by students saying they needed a nest swing. He said, “You are in high school. Why do you need a nest swing?” They said, “We think it would be fun.” So he delivered it and they had to come up with a roster, months later, for who was allowed to use it. That is also the feedback I get from students: they want to be playful. For a lot of female students in particular it is about being playful and social and safe. It is about areas where they can have gazebos or pods in which everybody can just be together and relax. It is also about looking at the broader schoolyard and having that sense of safety about it.

**THE CHAIR:** Have we missed anything?

**Ms Leigh:** Goodness. It is a broad area of focus. I cannot emphasise enough that it is important to revisit our design guidelines and to understand the frameworks that we are using to deliver these spaces. That is the starting point from which we begin these discussions. I think there need to be better outcomes. We are very preventative in the way that we plan for these spaces—to prevent risk, to prevent damage, to prevent maintenance. In fact, I think we need to be thinking more about the positives. How do we plan the affordances for students’ needs? How do we make sure that there are trees, make sure that there are plantings, make sure that there is a diversity of opportunity and experiences that they can use within these outdoor environments?

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, thank you so much for your attendance today.

**Ms Leigh:** Thank you.

**Hearing suspended from 1.39 to 1.50 pm.**

**CAVE, MRS WENDY**, Principal, Ainslie Public School; Secretary, Australian Government Primary Principals Association

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome back everybody to the public hearings of the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion for its inquiry into the future of school infrastructure in the ACT. The proceedings today are being broadcast live. The written transcript will be published on the Assembly website. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses use these words, “I will take that as a question on notice.”

We now welcome Wendy Cave, Principal, Ainslie Public School, and Secretary, AGPPA, the Australian Government Primary Principals Association. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry.

I remind all witnesses today of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Could you please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it.

**Mrs Cave:** I understand and agree.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mrs Cave:** Yes. Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission and to attend this hearing as a witness on behalf of the Australian Government Primary Principals Association. Our submission reflects the uniqueness of the ACT in its size and proximity to decision-makers locally and nationally, and my attendance here today is a privilege I am afforded in that context. Through our submission, we offer an operational view in the spirit of respect, integrity, collaboration and innovation.

I am really pleased to be here to help you to do this work. I bring a history with the directorate. I have over 30 years of leadership experience in schools and office positions. I have had the privilege of holding the position of principal in four schools in the ACT, and I have worked across all networks.

I am a supporter of public schools. My whole family has attended them. I know the context in which ACT traditions, plans and initiatives have arisen—and there they have been vast. I am a proponent of the system. As ACT Principals’ Association Co-President, I represent and work with 92 principals and their deputy principals, and we influence strategy and practice in advocacy, wellbeing, professional development and research.

What we have written resonates with these principles. The key points in the submission from AGPPA were calls for access to safe and healthy schools: that design, construction and maintenance of school infrastructure in the ACT should prioritise student outcomes, staff retention and the health and wellbeing of school leaders; and that infrastructure is fit for purpose and high quality, reflecting the value our

community holds for those who work and learn within our schools, and it impacts safety and wellbeing and the satisfaction of service users.

Our submission also calls for appropriate levels of responsibility in infrastructure projects. Increasingly, building service officers, business managers and principals are needing to do more of the planning and implementation of projects. Centralisation of these roles and responsibilities requires consideration, whilst balancing the reality that school staff carry knowledge and direct experience of the needs of their schools as communities.

The terms of reference enabled our association to reflect on some big questions, especially the purpose and function of schools in relation to evolving research and emerging priorities of professional educators and our communities. We know of the complexity in discussing the ACT as a whole. Each region brings some particular challenges. We also hold universal needs, supports from the directorates, expectations of our communities and opportunities to enable partnerships.

Outcomes we would like are clarity and transparency. As principals, we want to know when and how our schools are going to be continually upgraded to provide innovative teaching and learning facilities. We want strong and clear messages to the ACT community about what is available to our children and our families and what they can expect from us. We are needing to know when we are getting investments to upgrade—rather than to keep up. Once again, I am really happy to join this important conversation with you and help you with this work.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. I will lead off with the questions, and then I will hand over to Johnathan. In your submission, you highlight that school sizes are not a one-size-fits-all conversation, and that there are a lot of varying factors to what a school size should be.

**Mrs Cave:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Could you provide the committee with some more context in relation to what those factors are and how, in your opinion, the ACT should go about building new schools and how big they should be?

**Mrs Cave:** Schools need to be large enough to provide for the full implementation of the Australian curriculum. There is something in that about size and the resources that communities need in a school. They should also be designed so that connection and relationship building is understood and supported.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay. Are there some examples of schools in the ACT that are kind of the optimal size?

**Mrs Cave:** Again, schools are reflections of their community. While we would all agree that core to our business is establishing flourishing communities, the interplay between schools and communities is so key—and, therefore, it does depend. A flourishing community builds flourishing schools and, similarly, flourishing schools, where wellbeing thrives and great learning happens, support flourishing communities. They are so entwined, and it can shift over time as well.



It is challenging to say what is optimal. As a primary school principal, I know that the affordance of a size and shape of a school where a principal can engage across the school, across the grounds and within and throughout learning environments is a really important thing.

**THE CHAIR:** Great. Thank you.

**MR DAVIS:** I note in your submission, immediately after school size, you talk about long-term planning and demographic change, and you draw the committee's attention to what I can only assume to be the Towards 2020 school closure program and some of the risks associated with that.

It would appear to me, and I wonder if you share the same view, that that program in its implementation led to what the community described as “super schools” and the “super school model”. Mr Pettersson and I each have a few of what the community would describe as those in our electorates. I am interested in your view about whether that sort of preschool to year 10, on one site, super school model has delivered better educational outcomes?

**Mrs Cave:** I have worked in schools that have been super schools—the preschool to year 10 model. I have worked in tiny, closing schools. I have worked in medium sized schools as well. The important thing, I think, in that conversation in our submission, was about the impact on a community when a place that is at the heart of their world changes.

Quality outcomes will happen for students when they are in the hands of quality expert teachers. Facilities, and facility size and shape, as I said before, matter in terms of connectivity, and connection happens through people, and people are diverse, so I would like to remind the committee that the connection between student outcomes and teacher quality is so key.

The submission references the need to be mindful of when schools change their function or are taken away or redesigned. Communities are connected to familiarity and expectation, and the past is significant. Our school system is longstanding enough that we now see generations who have gone through each of our schools. They bring and carry memories and expectations as well. That is where that part of the submission was leading us—and leading us to be quite convincing about.

**MR DAVIS:** You were talking before about the need to upgrade and not just keep up. This might sound tangential, but I will draw your attention to a program the government has in another area: in public housing and in growing and renewing public housing. The argument being that there are a number of state-owned assets that are beyond their natural life and are proving too expensive to maintain. Many of those homes are younger than many of our schools.

The committee has heard many examples of schools covering quite large costs—to maintain them, heating and cooling and because of efficiency et cetera. What are some of the challenges or risks in what you have just articulated about that identity, and belonging to a school building, when the school building is no longer serving its

purpose? The government may need to, or want to, redevelop the site so as to maintain a school on the site, but the ground has fundamentally changed because pedagogy has changed, the building is old, and it is too expensive.

If the government were to embark on those sorts of substantial upgrades, how would we do that in a way that still protects that community identity and where people would be excited about the change? There is a lot in that; I am so sorry. I got there in the end!

**Mrs Cave:** No; that is fine, and I am fine for you to interrupt, as well, if I miss the thread that you were on there. Communication is key, and time for conversations with communities around the “why” and creating the vision of what it is about. I refer again to my point about the interest of the principal in being able to fulfil a community’s expectations and for them to lead a community to engage in envisioning the future as well. That takes time. There is a whole strategy in there.

Principals spend a lot of time talking about the “why” and helping families, particularly in primary school education, to understand what we are doing and why. The empowered and confident principal can hold that out for scrutiny. We know and understand debate is important, and it leads to ownership and deepening understanding. The processes to do that require time, and trust builds through that time the confidence in the changes that we are making.

**MR DAVIS:** It makes sense.

**Mrs Cave:** We have experience of working with communities around change in pedagogy—why we are teaching the way that we are teaching. The facilities are the same—understanding why we need to do what we are doing. Design is clever at this time—in working with communities to understand what it is that they value, how we give a nod to those things, and how we sustain and provide some continuity through the changing and developing infrastructure.

In that way, the advantage is that budget cycles and budget processes take time. What I know that communities need, and what empowers principals, is to have longer-term clarity so that we can project and bring communities with us on that journey.

**MR DAVIS:** I flagged it in my question, but I suppose I probably should have been a bit more direct. You spoke about a principal’s time: would it be fair to say that principals spend an awful lot more time on building management and maintenance the older the school building? You are nodding, so I will take that as a yes.

I will not ask you to name them but, if that is the case, are we at a point, given the age of the infrastructure in the ACT, that we should be seriously looking at, almost, knockdown-rebuilds of some of our older schools?

**Mrs Cave:** I come to this with a lived experience and current experience of being the leader, the principal, in one of the ACT’s oldest schools.

**MR DAVIS:** So it is a bit of a spicy question!

**Mrs Cave:** And it is extreme, but we also know that there is actually a lot that can be done in retrofitting redesign and what needs to be left. Again, I think the one-size-fits-all philosophy is a little vexed. As I said before, there are some universal needs, but each of our communities is a little nuanced as well.

Principals know their communities. In operationalising any of the recommendations that come from this inquiry, there will be a need for principals of schools to have an engagement in how things are redeveloped and the best way forward, because they know their communities.

**MR DAVIS:** It makes sense. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Unfortunately, we are nearly out of time—

**Mrs Cave:** That was so fast!

**THE CHAIR:** Yes. Time flies when you are having fun!

**Mrs Cave:** It does.

**THE CHAIR:** Is there anything that you would like to highlight that we might have missed?

**Mrs Cave:** There are clearly challenges: ageing school infrastructure, extensive retrofitting, workforce shortages in all industries, disruption of services in our schools during works, lessons from COVID—technology is expensive. When we are talking about infrastructure, there are buildings and there is the infrastructure required for contemporary teaching and learning approaches as well.

But there are opportunities. We have great examples of where schools have been redesigned and redeveloped as community hubs and places to bring communities together. Every parent brings their child to a primary school; so, again, the affordance of holistic community wellbeing and wraparound supports to supply our young learners through and within primary schools are really important. But the ageing school infrastructure is also an opportunity because the time is now. We have got to get this right. And, again, I lend my invitation to continue the conversation.

There is so much information about learning and neuroscience. As I said, in our submission we talked about the purpose of schools and schooling versus education. Picking up on Future of Education strategy conversations will be so important. The appreciation of outdoor learning settings, as touched on by the previous witness: their impact on physical and conceptual learning, and mental health and wellbeing—thinking about grounds more broadly. Aligning curriculum perspectives with practice is another great opportunity to get this right and bring communities into the conversation. We are teaching students about that important priority of sustainability. We teach our children about cultural integrity, and we value diversity—so, diverse entry points for children to come into ways of learning and places for learning as well. These are all contemporary challenges and opportunities that teachers are grappling with, and there is such a great link with this inquiry.

We know that people are the key to realising the goals of any organisation, and schools are no different. Infrastructure and its management in schools are entwined. The work of schools is relational. Principals bring together curriculum, families and communities, and we want to provide the best infrastructure that there is. We do look forward to continuing the conversation.

**THE CHAIR:** Mrs Cave, thank you for joining us today.

**Mrs Cave:** Thank you.

**Short suspension.**

**LANDFORD, MRS JULIA**, Founding Director, NatureArt Lab; Vice-President,  
Australian Association for Environmental Education  
**PEARCE, MS VIVIENNE OAM**, Vice-President, Australian Association for  
Environmental Education

**THE CHAIR:** We now welcome Mrs Landford and Ms Pearce, from the Australian Association for Environmental Education. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry.

**THE CHAIR:** I remind all witnesses today of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Could I please get you both to confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it.

**Mrs Landford:** Yes, I understand and agree.

**Ms Pearce:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. Ms Pearce, would you like to make an opening statement?

**Ms Pearce:** Yes. Because of the respect we have for our First Nations people and their knowledge, I would like to in Ngunnawal language give an acknowledgement of country, which has been spoken to me as an environmental educator at the Botanic Gardens:

*Dhawura nguna, dhawura Ngunnawal.*  
This is Ngunnawal country.

*Yanggu nunamanyan dhunimanyin.*  
Today we are all meeting together on Ngunnawal country.

*Ngunnawalwari dhawurawari Dindi wanggiralidjinyin.*  
We acknowledge and pay our respects to the elders.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Pearce. Mrs Landford?

**Mrs Landford:** Thank you very much. I would also like to acknowledge my respect for the Indigenous custodians of the land which we operate on.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the considerations for the future of the ACT school infrastructure. The Australian Association for Environmental Education is Australia's peak body for environmental educators, advocating for environmental education and contributing to skills development for education for sustainability. I am representing the ACT chapter as our vice president and recipient of the ACT Environmental Educator of the Year Award for 2019. I also speak as an educator and a former teacher within the ACT school system and the founder and director of the Environmental Education and Arts Centre in Canberra.

I would like to start with reference to a World Economic Forum Climate Governance Initiative white paper from January 2023. As stated, without question, nature is the foundation of our societies, economies and human existence. Earth's ecosystems are deteriorating rapidly, and we as humans collectively face severe risks unless we can address net zero emissions, stop and reverse nature degradation and move towards a nature positive future.

Leaders and decision-makers have a responsibility to embed the importance of nature in decision-making. We must understand our impact on the total amount of carbon in the atmosphere. We must understand our impact on the variability of organisms. We must engage with and have the support of critical environmental and community stakeholders. Key steps for addressing these issues are, firstly, to avoid and reduce pressure on nature by preventing or minimising impacts on nature and, secondly, to restore and regenerate nature.

Indigenous people are well placed to share knowledge and connections with nature. I believe we all have a duty of care to protect the next generation and all living things on our planet from the converging risks associated with climate change and biodiversity loss.

Our a-squared e-squared submission to this inquiry touches on most of the reference points posed by the committee, including access to schools, healthy schools, age-appropriate learning spaces and consideration of the external environment, including climate awareness. We also provided input for the learning interactions with teachers, spaces and pedagogy, cross-cultural impact, use of technology, the context of students from varying backgrounds and synergies within the wider community and to long-term planning and demographic change.

We have included evidence from a range of sources, including by our team members, eminent researcher Keith Scamp, Adjunct Professor at the School of Education from the Southern Cross University, myself, and Vivienne Pearce. We also note recommendations provided by the Australian Association for Environmental Education submission to the nature in our city inquiry in 2021 and the Conservation Council ACT submission for the management of school infrastructure inquiry in 2021.

Schools in our communities are critical to the future of our society. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals require all countries to build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all. Student performance is enhanced in schools with better physical learning environments.

There are three key themes that emerge from our submission across these areas. One of them is climate change; the second is nature connections and a sense of place; and the third is building communities. But the cross-cutting ingredient of all of these is environmental sustainability, so climate change is a key driver.

Consideration of all school building infrastructure should take account of climate change, climate adaptation, efficient energy use, waste management and awareness of biodiversity impacts through supply chains. This includes access to safe and healthy

schools, where issues such as ventilation and temperature are paramount for effective learning.

Every school should have circular economy principles and sustainable practices integrated into all aspects of management, with everything from rethinking choices, refusing single use, reducing consumption, reusing everything, refurbishing and repairing, repurposing, with recycling as our last option. We need to ensure that all schools are actively participating in the Sustainable Schools Program. This is of utmost importance if we, as a community, are to succeed with the challenges of climate change.

Nature connections and a sense of place is the second element that I wanted to focus on. We know that learning in outdoor environments has significant educational advantages for children. Pro-environmental behaviour has a causal relationship with connectivity with the natural environment and helps to establish place-based learning, relationships with nature and an understanding of the world.

Through nature connections we can develop generations of young people who become active citizens making lifelong, informed, environmentally sustainable decisions. Nature connections promote development of independence, self-discovery, communication skills and self-esteem. Giving children opportunities to learn in outdoor spaces also contributes to their understanding of biodiversity and natural cycles in nature.

To support nature connections, every school should have accessible outdoor nature spaces planted with indigenous plant species for children and teachers, and for communities to learn and play and relax in. Not only is this good for the environment in building biodiversity corridors for our city, but it also enhances our understanding of our unique Australian environment and landscape for cross-cultural communities that are very much part of our society.

The third aspect was building communities. The best schools are small, offering an environment where teachers, students and parents see themselves as part of a community. And there is strong evidence for small class sizes, including for academic results.

Building communities should include engaging with Indigenous Australians as respected members of our community, inviting partnerships for sharing and validating Indigenous knowledge and practice with nature, and building a sense of cultural identity for young Australians.

Incorporating programs such as the Stephanie Alexander program sets children up with skills for life, builds communities and promotes a sense of responsibility. The Watson primary school is actually a really great example of that in action in the ACT.

Professor Andrew Campbell, who was the former head of ACIAR, the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, provided an interesting set of comments at a recent National Press Club event. He was talking about converging securities with biodiversity loss and climate change and, among other things, that, if humanity is to survive, we need to protect and restore nature and we need to increase

community engagement. We are doing too little too timidly. Thank you very much for the opportunity to present our submission.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. In your submission you have clearly highlighted the importance of outdoor spaces. In particular, you have highlighted outdoor classrooms. Why do you think they are of benefit to young people?

**Mrs Landford:** I would like to cite an example from a recent discussion with a schoolteacher in a school in the ACT. She described her class, with a large group of children, where she has to typically teach them in a directed learning space. But the opportunity to take those children out to Birrigai, where they are learning in an outdoor environment, led to very different learning behaviours and communication behaviours with those children. Children who were most at risk or had additional needs were thriving in that outdoor learning environment at Birrigai.

What we as an association are suggesting is that schools should have those built-in outdoor learning environments so that children can thrive and so that teachers can thrive. What is happening in schools at the moment is that children are inside four walls of a classroom. Humans need to be outdoors and engaging with nature to learn, to create, to adapt, to communicate effectively and to be within a living life cycle and space. Children are happier and teachers are happier.

By providing those outdoor education spaces, we will actually see children, teachers and communities thriving. If we can rebuild the school grounds away from a concrete space into an interesting nature space that has all sorts of elements of nature incorporated into it, we will see far better learning outcomes at those schools.

**Ms Pearce:** I would like to add to that from my experience as a classroom teacher and also my experience teaching in an outdoor classroom at the Botanic Gardens. I have very much found kids that have additional needs, who would be a total nightmare if you made them sit at a desk in a classroom, often respond and you can give them praise because often they notice things, because they engage in a different way.

I have also had Koori groups through at the Botanic Gardens, and I know that, if you had those same kids in an indoor environment, you would have some problems—not always. The last Koori group I took through were very much engaged because their skill set of observation and relating things to their cultural background was very much in play.

Not every school can afford the bus to go on excursions. You need to be able to, in your class time, actually go out and see a few bees or see a few lizards or just sit surrounded by a natural environment. It changes the actual feel of how you learn, particularly if it is in spaces such as a yarning circle. It just changes the way in which teaching occurs—instead of the teacher standing up there talking down to the kids—if you are all out there.

This is what I very much experienced, particularly when I was a classroom teacher. There were very, very, limited opportunities. There may be at your school one place that you can go that is a dedicated outdoor classroom. But, the thing is, there are all these other classes running at the same time. You actually need to use an outdoor



classroom on numerous occasions; otherwise, the kids get so excited because they are finally outdoors. So it needs to be part of the general learning and education journey within the school.

**Mrs Landford:** There is some very good research that has been done by Amanda Lloyd in Sydney. There are some really valuable reference papers that she has authored that I would recommend incorporating in the decision-making processes that you are looking at as well, for outdoor nature classrooms and nature spaces in the schools.

The gardens are not just gardens that are around the perimeter of the school, but they are actually encompassing small spaces with gardens, where people can interact, and different teachers can bring their students out into different nature spaces in and around the school environment.

It also has that dual benefit of providing those biodiversity corridors throughout the Canberra region so that we have natural diversity moving in and through the school and the benefit to humans and children of much better learning outcomes and a happier community in general.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you, Mrs Landford and Ms Pearce, for your time today, and for your submission.

I want to touch on a point that you just made, Ms Pearce, about the cost of the bus for the excursion. I am interested in a bit of a class analysis relative to environmental education. You note in your submission at point (f) about a kitchen garden which would contribute to enabling students of varying income backgrounds to participate in active learning about healthy diets.

As a member of this place, I follow the social media accounts of all the schools in my electorate, and many of them across Canberra, and I have noticed a distinct difference in the extracurricular environmental programs relative to the SES profile of the student cohort. I wonder if that is an observation you have made as well and what advice you have for government to make sure every student, irrespective of household income or the SES profile of the school, has access to environmental education.

**Ms Pearce:** I have to tread carefully here, because there are equity funds in the schools. But, if I put my educator at the Botanic Gardens hat on, the schools that seem to have money to bring their groups more frequently tend to be the private schools. I have not taken a survey; this is just what I have seen of schools coming.

Equity funds at schools have only got a certain amount of pop. If you have got a school that has a high proportion of disadvantaged kids who perhaps cannot pay for excursions, I would imagine—I am just surmising this—this causes difficulties. I have not done a survey. We, as an association of environmental educators, have not done a survey. They are just my personal observations of seeing who comes on excursions to the Botanic Gardens.

It would be much better for all schools, regardless of the economic status that the children come from, to have somewhere right at their doorstep, because then it becomes part of the learning. These days, I hear lots of parents worried about their kids being stuck on their devices and the need to actually get them out in the environment. If you are doing that more at school, hopefully, that will also create a culture of kids wanting to go out and explore their natural surroundings more.

**Mrs Landford:** That is right. The same applies in the examples where schools are taking children out to Birrigai for outdoor education. I am not sure whether schools have access to the funding to take those children out on an equitable basis. But it is certainly an essential element of every child's upbringing to have that access to those spaces.

I think Canberra is actually very well established to be able to provide children with access to outdoor spaces adjacent to schools through nature reserves that might be adjoining suburbs and—

**Ms Pearce:** If we cannot do it Canberra, where can we do it, honestly? We just need more effort so it is every school, not just some.

**MR DAVIS:** I will ask a quick yes or no question, as I am conscious of time, on kitchen gardens. My observation is that, in many of the schools that have them, they are funded by the P&Cs. And a more active P&C is usually a telltale sign for a higher SES community. Would you share the view that the government should prioritise investment to make sure there is equity of access to environmental programs like kitchen gardens?

**Mrs Landford:** Absolutely, yes.

**Ms Pearce:** Absolutely. And I agree with your summation around having an active P&C. The average P&C person is not a person normally who comes from a low education and low earning capacity. It is usually higher. Those are the schools that often can put in for grants. Those are the schools that raise more money through their communities. But, honestly, with those disadvantaged kids, we need to scoop them up in a stronger community.

**Mrs Landford:** There is not only the Stephanie Alexander; it is also building pollinator gardens in schools so that children have access to those kinds of gardens as well, so they can observe and understand nature, and the connections with nature, and teachers can accommodate that and bring it into their educational curriculum every day. It then becomes part of the way of doing things within the school community.

**Ms Pearce:** But those kids are often the ones that have poor diets at home and that would really benefit much more from—

**Mrs Landford:** The Stephanie Alexander—

**Ms Pearce:** Stephanie Alexander.

**Ms Landford:** Yes.

**MR DAVIS:** Great. Thank you so much.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. On behalf of the committee, thank you so much for appearing today.

**Mrs Landford:** Thank you very much.

**Ms Pearce:** Thank you for letting us.

**THE CHAIR:** Our pleasure.

**Short suspension.**

**BERRY, MS YVETTE**, Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Early Childhood Development, Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Minister for Housing and Suburban Development, Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, Minister for Sport and Recreation and Minister for Women

**HAIRE, MS KATY**, Director-General, Education Directorate

**SIMMONS, MS JANE**, Deputy Director-General, Education Directorate

**MATTHEWS, MR DAVID**, Executive Group Manager, Business Services, Education Directorate

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome back, everybody. We now welcome Ms Yvette Berry MLA, Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, and officials. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Could each of you please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

**Ms Haire:** I do.

**Mr Matthews:** Yes, Mr Pettersson.

**Ms Berry:** Yes.

**Ms Simmons:** I do.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. I will lead with a question and then we will turn to Mr Davis. The ACT has a wide array of education infrastructure. We are building some beautiful new schools and we have a lot of older and sometimes heritage-listed schools. How do we balance the new cutting-edge school designs with some of the older infrastructure and the different teaching models that might exist as a result of infrastructure constraints?

**Ms Berry:** Thank you, Chair. That is a good question. We were just talking about that very issue out the front before we came in today: how teachers are flexible and are professionals and manage their education around the infrastructure that they are working with. Sometimes that can be challenging. I think we all agree with that. Having fit-for-purpose and modern facilities can lead to some really great flexible learning opportunities, but that can also be the case in some of the older infrastructure in some of our older schools where teachers use spaces differently so that they can allow for a flexible educational experience while managing the various limitations those older school environments might pose. You will see, when you visit older schools, how teachers work with those existing facilities and use them so that students are moving through the facilities; they are not sitting in rows in classrooms all day. Does anyone else want to say more on that?

**Ms Haire:** For the committee's benefit, I will pass to Jane Simmons to talk about the teaching in a variety of schools. Mr Pettersson, here in the ACT they range from Teloepa, which is 100 years old this year, to a school that the minister opened just last week, so they are 100 years old to a few days old, effectively. We have great teaching in every school and the infrastructure is a support to really great teaching, but it is not

the only factor.

I will ask Ms Simmons to talk about what we know about best practice in teaching and learning now and how teachers adapt to that in various types of infrastructure. Then I will pass to Mr Matthews to talk about how we are reflecting those ideas in our design specifications for our new schools, if that is helpful.

**THE CHAIR:** Maybe I will refine the question down—

**Ms Haire:** We will just do the teaching and learning bit first.

**THE CHAIR:** Let me refine the question down. In older schools, we have single, standalone teaching spaces. Is the plan to continue with single, standalone teaching spaces or is there a long-term plan to have some of the wider open and flexible spaces that we see in new schools?

**Mr Matthews:** Mr Pettersson, I will take one quick step back. Obviously, we have multiple funding sources to support quality education infrastructure. The government funds major projects, but we have an annual program of capital upgrades which is about improving the existing infrastructure. For example, when we are doing a front office, we can improve the administrative areas or the sick bay areas, and, if we are looking at particular learning areas, we might put in new wet areas or all new infrastructure. That is an ongoing process.

The government has committed to a \$99 million PSIRP over four years. We also have a repairs and maintenance program. We also have specific initiatives around things like roofs and replacing heating and cooling systems et cetera. So there are lots of different points of investment. Whenever we make those investments, we are seeking to upgrade the facilities for modern purposes and uses, and to improve what can be provided in those spaces. We apply our EDIS design specifications to any of those major works and upgrades to make sure that the current thinking is being applied to those spaces and to make sure that they are in line with current thinking.

The point that was made by both the minister and the Director-General is that teachers are great at using all the available spaces and producing magic, and what we want to do is enhance that wherever we possibly can. We are progressively working through our assets to upgrade them and to make them better. That is the objective of all of that spend. It is not necessary to replace functional assets for great teaching to occur.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**MR DAVIS:** Chair, could I ask a quick clarifying question before my substantive? I want to ask a question off the back of what you just said, Mr Matthews. On page 8 of your submission, it says that \$600 million was allocated to school infrastructure investment, and you just pointed out the \$100 million specifically for the Public-School Infrastructure Renewal Program. Can I deduce from that that the remaining \$500 million is for the construction of new schools?

**Mr Matthews:** That is a point-in-time number. The number you refer to, Mr Davis, is for the 2022-23 financial year. At each budget process, the government makes

additional commitments to school infrastructure. The \$99 million program that I mentioned was an election commitment of the current government over the life of the government, so that is a \$99 million four-year program. The totality of all the infrastructure is reported in the budget papers and in the annual report.

**MR DAVIS:** Just to be clear, we are talking about the Public School Infrastructure Renewal Program, which the submission says has \$100 million?

**Mr Matthews:** That is correct—yes.

**MR DAVIS:** I am just checking where the million dollars went. I want to ask about that program specifically because that appears to me to be the program with which older schools would be upgraded. This committee previously conducted an inquiry into school infrastructure and maintenance, before the inquiry into the future of school infrastructure, and we did a number of site visits. We visited schools, we talked to their principals and we looked around. One of the things that I observed was infrastructure improvements made, because, in a number of our schools, P&Cs had applied for grants from different parts of government. We saw a community program funded through EPSDD and we saw a beautiful track for kids to learn how to ride their bikes funded through TCCS, and these were funded for the schools because they have active P&Cs. I observed an overlap between the high-SES profile of these school communities relative to the additional infrastructure that they had managed to acquire for themselves.

How does this program, and then the government more broadly, account for those sorts of upgrades that happen outside of the purview of this program, to ensure that there is equity in upgrades across our school campuses?

**Mr Matthews:** That is a complex question but I will do my best to answer it, Mr Davis. On one level, taking a step back, when we are talking about infrastructure, we are talking about portfolio management. It sounds very boring, but we have a portfolio of assets and our responsibility is to make an assessment of those assets and to make investment decisions around where we think an upgrade is going to benefit the assets and the school communities and/or whether repairs are needed or there is a safety issue. Those are our main criteria for the allocation of the PSIRP. We invite representations from every school principal to nominate priority projects and we certainly do our best to try to make sure that every school has a level of investment and we can meet priority programs. But, as I said, that is against a portfolio management approach.

The things that you talked about are in addition to that. We recognise that the schools are in different situations with their ability to fundraise or to undertake additional activities, but it has long been the case that P&Cs and parent communities support their local communities to do extra things that the local community wants above what the government of the day can provide. That is not a new thing. The nature and extent of that can vary by school but also by different parent cohorts at different times. You could have active groups of parents that are very committed about doing fundraising and contributing to their school, and, at other times, you do not.

In a very literal sense, we do not discount the investment that we make in schools on

the basis that another school cannot engage in extra fundraising. We do it on an asset-condition basis, but we do want to make sure that overall, across the system, there is equity in our investment and that every student in our system has the right to access the best possible infrastructure.

**MR DAVIS:** I am curious as to whether the government observes the situation which I highlighted as an obstacle to achieving equity of infrastructure and if there is any way that you account for that. I mean, to be very practical, do you acknowledge that a school might have received \$20,000, \$30,000, \$40,000 or \$50,000 worth of grant applications from the ACT government, across different directorates, for infrastructure when deciding whether they will reach the top of the pile for their infrastructure upgrade request or whether you will prioritise a school that maybe has not seen as much of the government's money in recent years? How is that decision made?

**Mr Matthews:** The minister can talk about the government's response to that. From a practical sense, most of the fundraising is for nice-to-have types of activities. That could be a garden, a bike track or something—

**MR DAVIS:** I am sorry—I do not mean to interrupt. I should stress, Mr Matthews—and everyone accepts P&Cs fundraise, and they all should and they all will—that I am talking about instances where infrastructure at schools has been upgraded because the ACT government has given the money but it has not been specifically from the Public School Infrastructure Renewal Program.

**Mr Matthews:** The point I was getting to, Mr Davis—and thank you for pushing me in that direction—is that the core infrastructure requirements at schools are funded by the government. The activities for which funding is sought by schools is often additional activities, additional infrastructure that a school community would like. The fact that other ACT government agencies are investing, or that charitable organisations also want to support additional infrastructure in schools, is not bad thing; that is a good thing. But the core infrastructure requirements are provided by the government.

**MR DAVIS:** To the question that you referred to the minister, I am trying to understand whether the government sees that there is a risk of inequities in the provision of infrastructure when a decision is made, or whether there is an awareness to account for that when determining allocation of resources under this program.

**Ms Berry:** The point that Mr Matthews was making with regard to the \$99 million program is that it is not a matter of every school getting \$50,000, or lower socioeconomic schools getting \$50,000 because they have a greater need because of the demographic. It is about management of the assets. If a school needs a \$50,000 investment into repair of something, that does not mean that they are getting more than another school that does not need a \$50,000 repair of something but are a low-SES school.

If a school is in a space where they might need additional supports, it could include infrastructure and it could include other additional supports around teaching and learning resources. Those are the kinds of things that we would provide to the schools

in those particular circumstances. There are examples that we could provide where that has occurred.

**Mr Matthews:** Minister, it might also be worthwhile mentioning that, in fact, some of our highest SES areas have our oldest school infrastructure. The Director-General has talked about Telopea Park, but, if you want to talk about the inner south and the inner north, they have some of our oldest school buildings—

**MR DAVIS:** Not if I can avoid it! No—I am just kidding. That is just me being parochial.

**Mr Matthews:** I appreciate the point you are making about equity and how investment by the government might support equity outcomes. I really appreciate that point, but we make an investment on an asset basis, and, as I said, in fact some of our higher-SES areas have older school infrastructure.

**MR DAVIS:** I have one last follow-up question and it goes to something you said before, Mr Matthews, about principals and school leaders being the ones applying on behalf of their schools to access this fund to provide for capital works. I preface this question by pointing out that we are clearly spending a lot more money building new schools, which is in itself not a bad thing. We are victims of our own success and everyone wants to move here—all of that—but can I get a breakdown of the difference between requests made for funding and funding allocated? I would like to get a sense of the demand in our established school communities for infrastructure investment.

**Mr Matthews:** Mr Davis, I can check what we can provide, but I do not know whether we are going to be able to give you what you want. For example, principal A in school B might have a whole laundry list of things that they would like to have. They might want a new gym or they might want a performing arts centre et cetera. We do not necessarily cost all those things. We put out a general request for priorities and we look at the things that are at the top of that list and then we match that against our condition data and our budget. We are not costing every proposal that comes from a school community. We would not be able to provide you with a table that says, “This is the value of things that were asked for and this is the value of things that were funded.” That information is not available.

**MR DAVIS:** That is fair. Could you provide the committee with an analysis of what was costed for what was funded? I will ask this: would it be fair to assume that, if a project nominated by a school community was costed, there was broad agreement that it seemed like a good idea? We would obviously start the ball rolling to plan if it were achievable under the program. Maybe it would give the committee at least some taste of the difference between appetite and the ability to satisfy if we could look at the ones that were costed versus the ones that were funded.

**Ms Berry:** The roof replacement program is a good way to understand those priorities.

**Mr Matthews:** The minister raises a really good example. Generally—to answer your question, Mr Davis, and then I will go to the minister’s prompt—we only cost a project that we are going to proceed with. We have a list of possible projects and there



can be some level of scoping of what they might involve and what they do not involve, but it is only when they turn into projects that we are going to deliver that we start doing that detailed costing and scoping work.

Any individual project could have a price variation that is significant. There is the scoping and then, when we go to market and get it priced, that is how we decide what it costs. The roofing is a good example of that because we have done a lot of investigation work around roofs and we have done some estimation around what we think the costs and the scope are. Then we go through the process of receiving bids and entering into a contract, and there can be variation.

**Ms Haire:** If it is helpful, Mr Davis, I will add that, in our annual report each year, we report on all the projects that have been funded through the PSIU, which gives you a sense of the enormous breadth and scale of those projects. We have that for the last several years. I think we even talked about it when we came to the infrastructure committee last time. We could also talk more about how the PSIU process works. What you can see from our annual report is an extraordinary breadth across pretty much all the schools, apart from the very new ones, each year. We would be happy to provide that. We could just give you the numbers for that.

**MR DAVIS:** No—there is no need to provide that because I have certainly read it and I understand that. What I am trying to get here is that there has to be some dataset that you are able to provide the community so that we have some understanding of the difference between the demand from established school communities for infrastructure and what we have been able to deliver. The committee simply cannot do its work without having an understanding of the pent-up demand for infrastructure spending across our schools. If you are asking school leaders to nominate projects, you would have a sense.

**Mr Matthews:** Mr Davis, what we can do—I will go back and check with the team after this—is take it on notice. We can provide you with a list of the projects that have been requested by principals. When we do our round of asking for project priorities from principals, they give us a list. We can give you the list of what they have given us, but that will not be costed. That was my earlier comment—

**MR DAVIS:** That is okay. That is perfect. That is exactly what I would like. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** After all that, I think it is your substantive.

**MR DAVIS:** Give me a minute. In fairness to you, why do you not take one, because those were a lot of supps.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay. Our city is increasingly dense. What work has the government done in investigating vertical schools for the ACT?

**Ms Berry:** Yes—it is getting denser. We have not really had a need for vertical schools beyond three stories in the ACT until now. It is something we will probably be investigating more. Obviously, we have two-storey and some older three-storey schools, but to build in the city into the future, as space becomes more constrained,

we will need to consider vertical schools. The committee has visited some of the vertical schools around the country, and there are some I have been to, as well, like Adelaide Botanic High School. I cannot remember the other one in Melbourne, but it was a primary school in Melbourne that was really challenged. It had no space and had to purchase land, and then purchase more land for a physical play space for the students. That particular community required a primary school.

When you visit those schools, you see that primary schools tend to do better with lower storeys because of the movement of young people, the level of noise and the specialised spaces that primary school students need. High schools and colleges with a taller school of four, five or six storeys, plus, can cope better with older students and their moving between classes and that sort of activity. Generally, that is the advice that we have for design and what would be more appropriate. At the moment, I do not think we have plans for anything beyond two or three storeys.

**Mr Matthews:** That is correct, Minister.

**Ms Haire:** Exactly as the minister has said, the so-called vertical schools, multistorey schools, are determined according to the availability of the land, the size of the catchment and the needs of the school. We have not as yet been required to build schools of more than a couple of storeys, as the minister has said. Those schools that you visited in inner urban areas of large cities, on brownfield sites where there is no spare land, require those kinds of design solutions. We are conscious of that, and, consistent with our other design specifications, we would consider that in the future if we were building on a brownfield site, on a constrained piece of land, but we do not have any projects like that at the moment.

In doing that, we would also consider all the other design principles that are involved in the best practice design of ACT schools. The number of storeys is only one factor, determined by the size of the land, and then we also take into account sustainability, accessibility and other important considerations. In and of themselves, vertical schools are not a thing; they are more one element of design as required by the specific requirements of the site.

**THE CHAIR:** Very much. They are not the goal; they are sometimes a response—

**Ms Haire:** They are a potential solution in a certain circumstance, which we do not currently have.

**THE CHAIR:** I would be very impressed if someone knows the answer to this: how many schools do we have right now with three storeys?

**Ms Berry:** Or three levels?

**THE CHAIR:** Yes. That is the highest we go. I am struggling to think where they are. That is why I asked.

**Mr Matthews:** Generally, it would be older high schools. Places like Canberra High come to mind and Stromlo—that kind of quadrangle design, with lifts and stairwells. Most of those kinds of schools would be three-storey schools. They are well tested

and used in our systems, so they work and they are functional.

**Ms Berry:** They can even survive a tornado, I understand.

**Mr Matthews:** Let us hope we will never have to test that, Minister, but they are definitely strong structures. The only thing I would add to what Ms Haire said about vertical schools is that we have a very active watching brief on what is happening in other states and territories. We have undertaken visits and we stay in contact with our colleagues. We are very much interested in understanding the functionality of those environments and how much they cost as well, in terms of building costs but also in terms of running costs.

With the way that our Education Directorate infrastructure specifications are designed, they could be applied to a vertical school. It would be a process of turning those specifications into a vertical design. That would be the process that we would go through in the event that it was the design solution that we were requiring.

**THE CHAIR:** Increasingly, more people are living in our town centres. Which town centre, with its surrounding schools, has the largest capacity constraints for future school enrolments?

**Mr Matthews:** We would have to take the detail of that on notice, Mr Pettersson. You are talking about the main town centres and the capacity of surrounding schools. I can assure you that that is something we monitor very closely. In the Education Directorate, we have a planning committee, which I am very happy to be involved in. It is a great committee—

**THE CHAIR:** It sounds like a lot of fun.

**Mr Matthews:** It is. I am sure it is the sort of committee that you would enjoy attending, Mr Pettersson, because it really looks at the details of a lot of those things. What we look at is the availability of the local area enrolment approach of the act. Our core requirement is to give every child the opportunity to attend a local school, and we do that by making sure there is enough capacity in neighbouring schools. We have done that recently with Belconnen and Woden. Those are two examples to look at. That is something that we always continue to monitor. To date, we have determined that there is sufficient capacity in surrounding neighbourhood schools to meet the requirements of children that are living in town centres, but obviously there is quite a lot of development happening in those town centres and it is something we will be very proactive about monitoring.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, my very first question to you in the Assembly, as a baby MLA, was about school closures, and you committed the government to no school closures this term, which is fantastic. I want to stress that this question is not about school closures. What it is about is that, as Ms Haire pointed out, we have some school infrastructure assets that are old, and I imagine we have to spend a disproportionately higher amount of money to upgrade and maintain them. Has the government done any work to assess the equity benefits in terms of access to

good infrastructure, and the economic benefits of wholesale knockdown-rebuilds? I know that is a spicy question, but do we have schools in our portfolio which we are spending a lot of money on to upgrade? And has there been any cost-benefit analysis work done as to whether they would be due for a complete upgrade?

**Ms Berry:** We have definitely done some partial knockdown-rebuilds. Belconnen High was in a very low socioeconomic area 10 years ago when the decision was made to do some work at that school. It also had some hazardous materials. It had a whole mix of challenges. That is one example where a school was specifically identified. Garran would be another one, although it is in a different area of the ACT. There is also Narrabundah College. It happens as a matter of need and when the school comes to a point where it is no longer able to be maintained safely. Then the decision is made to either knock the whole school down or partially knock it down, and then rebuild. Garran is probably a good example of that.

**Mr Matthews:** It is, Minister. We repair and maintain, then we upgrade, and then we would be in a situation where we need expanded school capacity or there are other infrastructure constraints; that is when we look at the options on a site-by-site basis, as the minister described. With Belconnen High School, we decided to modernise—retain some of the infrastructure and build some new infrastructure. That is an example of the best cost-benefit analysis for that particular site. In the case of Garran, the commitment from the government is to rebuild the school on the same site but on another part of the site. Effectively, we are doing a significant infrastructure upgrade of that school because of the needs of the area, firstly, but also because of the condition of the existing infrastructure on site. That is the way that we do it.

Generally, when we have a demand for additional capacity or asset assessment where we need to do significant work, we are making the decision around whether we are repairing, upgrading or, in fact, modernising, which is our language for replacing existing infrastructure but maintaining the school.

**MR DAVIS:** I am interested in a threshold question. Using Garran as a great example, you have obviously made the decision. It is a bit crass to describe it as a knockdown-rebuild, but forgive me for not having a better way of describing it. That is what we are doing there. You have obviously hit a threshold point, and I imagine a contributing factor would be the money that the school needed to have invested in it to maintain it safely and fairly over the years. Are there any other schools in our portfolio at the moment that you would argue are starting to come close to that threshold point? Are there any little red flags that pop up in a system if you are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, every year, just to maintain a school facility?

**Ms Haire:** There are a couple of other projects, which we may have talked about at budget estimates, where we are looking at modernisation and expansion of existing schools. There are the inner north schools. We are doing feasibility work at the moment on both North Ainslie and Majura primary schools because they have the combination of a growing population and ageing infrastructure. That is a very similar, but not identical, example to the Garran example.

What this illustrates is that we look at the schools case by case. We have experts who

are watching the demographic shifts the whole time and are measuring, as Mr Matthews said, the enrolment capacity. We are also, through our infrastructure and capital works area, looking at the maintenance needs. Then we bring that together on a case-by-case basis to provide advice to the minister. Garran, North Ainslie and Majura also illustrate the approach that we take.

**Mr Matthews:** And Narrabundah College, Telopea Park and Garran. They are all examples of really great existing public schools where we are doing significant refurbishments of their assets.

**MR DAVIS:** This is my last question. It is terribly parochial but I must ask it. I have schools in my electorate, in Tuggeranong, that are at about 50 per cent capacity. We know from the government's own Indicative Land Release Program that the population in my electorate is due to decrease over the coming decades, based on the government's land release program. How do you make sure—going back to the primary question of equity—that smaller schools with populations that, by the government's own estimates, are not going to grow are still equitably maintained and also have access to opportunities like kitchen gardens and learn-to-ride programs—other investment opportunities that seem to have popped up in other schools?

**Mr Matthews:** We are committed to every public school, Mr Davis, including the ones in your electorate and the schools in Tuggeranong. When we say that we want every public school to be a great school, we really mean that. We want every child in Canberra to be able to go to their local public school and have a great experience. That means that we need to invest in each of our schools and continue to do so. And we are strongly supportive of the local enrolment policies. We want people to go to their neighbourhood school. That is something that we have continued to communicate around. That would be one of the protective factors for schools in your electorate. We want every child in Tuggeranong to choose to go to their public school as a preference, and we want to continue to show that they are great schools so that they are great choices for families to make.

Obviously, we look at the age of all that infrastructure. Most of the schools in Tuggeranong were built in the late 80s through to the late 90s. There are some that have come subsequently to that. They are of an age where they are still very fit for purpose and they are still in generally good condition, but we know that we are going to have to continue to invest in them. That goes back to my earlier answer about portfolio management. We will make sure that the schools in Tuggeranong continue to be well maintained so that they are fit for purpose, attractive to the local communities and will be their schools of destination. We have that commitment and I think we have shown that commitment in the way that we have invested, and, on a needs basis, we will continue to do that.

**MR DAVIS:** Given what Ms Haire said about the necessary work in areas of booming population growth like North Ainslie and Majura—I do not think anyone negates that—I suppose I am being a bit protectionist and ensuring that, if there are schools in my electorate that continue to sit at 50 per cent of their capacity because our population is not increasing, there will not be risks of missed opportunities, not just in the maintenance of a good school but also in being able to apply for and subsequently receive funding for additional infrastructure investments that enrich the

learning experience. I used the example of a kitchen garden, the learn-to-ride schools, and things like that.

**Ms Berry:** They do. Examples of that are Calwell High School, Wanniasa High School and I think Gowrie Primary School. Do you have a list?

**Ms Haire:** I do not think I have a Tuggeranong list here—sorry, Minister—but all of those—

**Ms Berry:** Wanniasa had significant upgrades over the last five years or so.

**Mr Matthews:** They had a roof upgrade; they have had some learning unit upgrades; they have had some upgrades to their outdoor spaces. That is an example of a school in Tuggeranong where we have continued to invest.

**Ms Berry:** The preschool as well.

**Ms Haire:** Wanniasa Hills Preschool was completely rebuilt. It opened just last year. You have probably seen it. It is very beautiful.

**Mr Matthews:** I take the general point that you are making, Mr Davis—that every school needs to have a good level of amenity and good programs to offer the full range of educational opportunities to students. That is the approach we take in the public education system. We obviously spend money on infrastructure on a needs basis, but a lot of the things that you are starting to talk about are in the areas of teaching and learning and program delivery. If we can roll out initiatives like the inclusion coaches, which is an initiative that is oriented towards the Tuggeranong network, or if there are other support initiatives that we can offer to make sure that the whole suite of offerings in each part of the city is appropriate, we will continue to do that.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, everyone. I apologise that we are running behind time. On behalf of the committee, thank you, Minister and all officials, for being here today. You have taken questions on notice, so please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the proof *Hansard*. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all our witnesses today who have assisted the committee through their experience and knowledge. We also thank broadcasting and Hansard staff for their support. If members wish to ask questions on notice, please upload them to the parliament portal as soon as possible.

**The committee adjourned at 3.16 pm.**