



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION**

(Reference: [Inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure](#))

Members:

**MR M PETERSSON (Chair)
MR J DAVIS (Deputy Chair)
MR P CAIN**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 1 JUNE 2021

**Secretary to the committee:
Mr D Leary (Ph: 620 50124)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 1.32 pm.

Oakey, Ms Helen, Executive Director, Conservation Council ACT Region

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon. Welcome to the second public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion for its inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure. Before we go further, 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 the city and this region.

Today, we will hear evidence from the Conservation Council. Before we start, there are some housekeeping matters that I wish to draw to your attention. All mobile phones are to be switched off or put into silent mode. Please respect the stated room limits; I do not think that is a problem today. For non-pass holders, please ensure you have checked in, either with the Check In CBR app or as advised by the attendants. Witnesses are to speak one at a time and to speak directly into the microphone to ensure an accurate Hansard transcription. The first time you speak, please state your name and the capacity in which you appear.

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Ms Oakey: I have.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Ms Oakey, do you have an opening statement?

Ms Oakey: I will make a brief opening statement. Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to present to the committee today on the inquiry into the management of school infrastructure. I do not have a formal statement; I just want to open by saying that the Conservation Council is very aware that there are lots of activities and policies in place that are beginning to address sustainability issues, particularly overlaid onto school infrastructure, and that we are conscious that the Education Directorate and students, teachers and principals have all made a great contribution in terms of sustainability.

We wanted to make the submission to highlight potential opportunities, going forward, for a more systemic approach for dealing with sustainability through that infrastructure lens because of the challenges that are coming towards us. Some of those challenges have already been felt. Things like the impacts of climate change, and obviously the bushfires a year and a half ago, had a significant impact on the way that schools operated and the way that students were able to participate and function during the day. That is probably something that we have not, as a community, given a

great deal of thought to, yet—what changes we might need to make, across the board, across our whole school system, in terms of ensuring that the impacts on students and teaching staff are mitigated as best as possible.

We also wanted to highlight the opportunities there are for schools as significant pieces of real estate across our city. I think there are about 130 to 140 schools across the ACT. Not all of those are in the public system. They obviously have significant land tenure. They might be able to play a role in putting in place living infrastructure, stormwater management systems and things like that—which can contribute, along with other parts of land tenure across the city, to a more sustainable city going forward.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you, Ms Oakey. I will lead off with some questions, and we will make our way down the line. The ACT, gratefully, has a very wide-ranging spectrum of school infrastructure. On one end we have very old and outdated facilities in some parts of the city, and in other parts we have very new facilities. In my electorate of Yerrabi, which covers Gungahlin, we have some of the newer schools. Do you still see room for improvements in a recent build like Margaret Hendry School?

Ms Oakey: I think some of the newer schools certainly meet their obligations with regard to energy, insulation and building design a lot more effectively than a lot of the older schools that in the Inner South, Inner North, down in Woden and potentially even down in Tuggeranong. Certainly, with regard to energy systems Margaret Hendry is an all-electric school, so that is a big tick in terms of going forward and not being reliant on gas for energy systems. Presumably things like double glazing, orientation of the buildings, and potentially how well the buildings are sealed are the kinds of things that can be done better with a new build. It is the same as our housing stock. Our housing stock that was built in the 60s and 70s will really struggle to adapt, whereas the housing stock that is built from a certain date forward has better energy efficiency. The schools will be the same.

So the opportunities for the newer schools are probably around living infrastructure and vegetation. We should be starting to think about those campuses as opportunities to put native plantings in place—with regard to trees and tree cover to provide cooling to the buildings, but also to provide habitat, potentially, for birds and small mammals and things like that. There is no reason why we cannot use some of our school campuses to extend those urban biodiversity themes across the school yards. The beautiful thing about that is that it brings a whole load of benefits for children, as well, in terms of having educational opportunities.

The other area is around growing food and having gardens. We know a lot of schools already have kitchen gardens and vegetable gardens that they are running. They are running them really effectively. It depends on the school, the school leadership and the parent body, often, as to whether those things are happening, but those are real opportunities to put in more green and less concrete. I think that is something that we really need to think about. I will leave it there because there are a few other things to say on that. I can keep going if you would like me to, but there are a few other things around living infrastructure, as well, that new schools can do better.

I will add one other thing—that is, thinking about porous surfaces. It is really important, as we go forward developing the city, that we try to use fewer hard surfaces and more porous surfaces. The old-fashioned schools traditionally had quite a few hard surfaces—basketball courts, netball courts and all of those sorts of things. Porous surfaces can be really beneficial in terms of water management, in terms of keeping water on the site and in terms of using porous surfaces so that the water actually seeps through into the ground. As you know, the ACT has a living infrastructure target of a 30 per cent tree canopy target by 2045—not 2030; sorry, my targets are all muddled up—but there is also a porous surfaces target of 30 per cent. Schools provide a really good opportunity to help us meet those targets.

THE CHAIR: You have listed off a long list of things that are all very good. Do you have jurisdictions in mind that may be at the forefront of these, or is the ACT actually at the forefront?

Ms Oakey: I think the ACT is probably doing quite well in terms of the policy settings that are required, or the ambition. I do not have to hand particular jurisdictions that I think are doing it better than us, and I think probably the ACT has a unique opportunity. It is that same city-state opportunity, where we have a single Education Directorate for the public school system, and where the Catholic Education Office covers off a lot of the other independent Catholic schools. So the ACT has that unique opportunity to think about how they are going to bring the older stock of schools and the older real estate forward to catch up to this level of ambition that has potentially been created in some of the newer schools that are being built already. So, one of the challenges facing the ACT, which I think has been highlighted by other people in the submissions that they have made to the inquiry, is that we have this ageing real estate stock of old schools. But it is not just the inside of the buildings and the interiors and the way they are constructed, but also the outside of the buildings, the play spaces, the ovals and the water sustainable urban design, which are not things that people were thinking about when those places were built.

MR DAVIS: While we may not have sources for other jurisdictions that we think are doing some really good things, are you across any particular programs or school campuses in the non-government school sector, the independent school sector, in the ACT that are running good innovative programs that the ACT Education Directorate could emulate or at least research?

Ms Oakey: I am not sure that I am. Certainly not in the independent school sector. That is probably something you would need to ask them. We are not in the position of going around to all the different schools, and because the independent schools are independently run, it is hard to find out what the programs are.

Individual schools across the territory are doing some really great stuff, whether it is student driven, teacher driven or principal driven. Even the directorate are starting to think about things like living infrastructure.

I would have to be honest and say that I am not sure what the independent sector is doing in this space at this point. Maybe I should take it on notice.

MR DAVIS: That is okay.

THE CHAIR: Do you want to take it on notice?

Ms Oakey: No. I suspect that your committee would have more time to look into it than I might.

MR DAVIS: That is a fair comment.

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak body for environmental action in the ACT. You represent more than 40 member groups. There is an awful lot of expertise in your organisation. I wonder how much the Education Directorate and the minister reach out to you to source that expertise when developing and implementing sustainability and environmental protection policies in schools.

Ms Oakey: They have not reached out directly to us, but I would not be surprised if they have reached out to some of our member groups. We have a number of member groups that engage in the education space—for example, ACT for Bees, SEE-Change and the Canberra Environment Centre. Those are the kinds of organisations that do community education programs.

This might be the first time we have dabbled in this area. This is a new conversation for us. We would be open to those overtures. We have just produced a junior guide for the ACT's natural heritage which we are about to circulate to all ACT public schools and independent schools. That clues people in to our natural environment and to the different ecosystems, habitats and species that we have in the ACT. That is our first entry into the ACT school system for a while. Hopefully, it will be a good conversation starter. Those are going to be distributed to all primary schools in the ACT. It is really exciting. There are some principles and ideas in there that could be translated into schools.

What is really important going forward is thinking about what the directorate and the school administration bodies can do that is a systemic response to our biodiversity challenges, our climate challenges, our energy challenges and our water challenges. It is having a plan that sits right across the system, and it is supporting schools to make changes based on that plan. Whether that requires infrastructure, training or information might be different for different schools, depending on where they are up to in their journey.

It is important that ACT schools develop some standards to aspire to, in particular with heating, cooling and air conditioning. The directorate has been focused on ensuring that there is somewhere in public schools where children can go on hot days and trying to get cooling systems up and running. We could look at setting those kinds of standards right across the system. It would take a fair bit of investment and time to bring all of the schools up to those kinds of standards, because some can be expensive undertakings. What is important is that the system starts planning—planning to be more climate resilient and planning to improve biodiversity and living infrastructure.

MR DAVIS: I ask the question in the context of the last public hearing we had on this inquiry. We heard from a number of groups, particularly in the disability sector, who gave evidence that they did not feel adequately consulted by the directorate as to the

design of new school builds or modifications to older school builds. I am interested in finding out the Conservation Council's perspective. Do you feel that you would be well equipped and able to value-add to a consultation process the directorate could lead in an effort to develop a plan to see our schools be more sustainable?

Ms Oakey: Yes, absolutely. We have not been engaged in any kind of formal way by the Education Directorate on this issue.

MR CAIN: Are you aware of any current government programs to implement some of your recommendations?

Ms Oakey: Yes. Putting solar panels on schools has been a strategy that has come through from the government and there is a process to reduce energy costs for the systems that are in place. Schools are taking into account things like retrofitting double glazing. What I am not completely sure of is how many of these programs are right across the board—which of them are institutionalised across the directorate as a directorate objective as opposed to what is picked up and run by individual schools.

With school-based management in the ACT, the way that schools are managed can be quite different. There is an interface there, but it can be a bit of a grey area as to what is directorate led, and driven and supported through funding, and what is school based, driven and supported through the school's budget and how that happens.

Upgrading solar panels and retrofitting of insulation and double glazing are the things that I am aware of. You might need to check with them, but I think the directorate now has a position that is supporting schools in putting in biodiversity, appropriate plantings and things like that. That is something I had not seen before, but I did note it recently.

MR CAIN: Improving the living infrastructure of schools is something I am particularly keen on. I am aware that some schools have chickens and maybe some manageable livestock. Is that something that you think would contribute to a sustainable and also a more wholesome and well-rounded, education?

Ms Oakey: Yes. The kitchen gardens and chickens are a wonderful initiative to connect children with where their food comes from, how it is made and the realities of growing your own food and looking after something. That has been something we have seen in some schools for quite some time now, but it has started to spread really nicely. There are some real challenges around having animals and livestock on campus because of who gets to look after them during the school holidays; there are some logistical challenges.

MR CAIN: I have a rescue chicken from a local primary school.

Ms Oakey: Who wants to take the chook home for six weeks? There are some real challenges. In some ways, those are real challenges around looking after gardens full stop, because they do require ongoing care. That is one of the beautiful benefits around the forest gardens that people have been putting in. The forest gardens are a bit more resilient. The students and teachers put the plantings in, but once they are established, they can look after themselves and provide an urban cooling effect as

well. They make really nice places for students to hang out in.

THE CHAIR: One of your recommendations is that schools should be built with a comprehensive waste management system. What are the essential elements, do you think, for a waste management system?

Ms Oakey: It is quite challenging actually. I think what we are looking at, over the next 10, 15, 20 years, is that we obviously are going to have to give up this addiction to just putting a thing in one of two bins, seeing it disappear and knowing that it has all been dealt with. Schools, like every other place where human activity happens, generate quite a lot of waste.

I think that one of the things—and this is why we put it in the submission—is that it does point to the infrastructure that is required. You cannot really manage your waste very effectively if you do not have the right infrastructure in place—if you do not have the right systems. The systems will support the behaviour change and the behaviour change is easier when you have got the right physical systems.

You are probably aware that when you go to most schools what you will see out the back is a couple of big hops or the big skip bins that come and get picked up. And there is usually a red one and there is a mixed recycling, comingled bin. Those are usually managed by the staff. The maintenance staff will actually manage those because they are often too big for the children to handle.

At a sort of more student level you might see some waste management because some students got very enthusiastic about collecting “Lids for Kids” and schools might have a bin in the foyer or they are very excited about doing a REDcycle program; so they are collecting soft plastics.

But what we are probably going to need to do is start separating out some of those waste streams more at source. In the ACT we are obviously developing different comingled, recycling sorting solutions, but they will not deal with all of those waste streams. There are clear waste streams at the moment that people could start separating out but you have got to have a bin out the back that is for your plastic, soft plastics, your lids, your clean paper, your dirty paper and your waste.

Then thinking about your organics as well—and organics is a big one for schools because, of course, everyone who goes there, takes their lunch, has their leftovers, does not eat their lunch—some schools make kids take it home. Some schools will have kids put it in the bin. But really I think right across the board there is probably a lot of room for improvement around schools and how they manage that waste. But it takes a little bit of physical space. Most schools would have access to that physical space but you need to think through how the waste is going to get collected, who is going to take it to the next step of the waste stream, how it gets there.

It is a little bit of a “watch this space” thing, I think, because we do not actually know, for example, what we are going to do with soft plastic recycling at the moment, except taking it to the supermarket. But I would hope that in five years we are starting to think about how we are going to manage that soft plastic recycling ourselves.

Organics is a great opportunity for children and I really think that we should not be taking organics offsite in a school. It is a big space. We can have compost bins. We can have kitchen gardens. We can use that organic material onsite to both grow kitchen gardens but also to grow forest gardens and to provide nutrients into the soil. Every time we are doing that, we are improving the quality of the porous nature of the soil. We are improving the soil quality so that we can grow more things. But we are also improving the filtration of the water and the soil quality. Then the water does not run off as much. It sounds like we are turning every school into a little farm but there are opportunities there.

I think one of the things it speaks to is whether we want to see our schools as just education institutions Monday to Friday for the kids or do we want to see them as community hubs where we bring families and parents in, and they can actually participate in these activities and then they become a broader community space. But that is probably a conversation for a different day.

MR DAVIS: Just on the composting and management of organic waste, are you aware of any ACT school campuses that are doing this—if not best practice—at least well? You have spoken previously about how—

Ms Oakey: You are giving me all the hard questions.

MR DAVIS: I do not mean to, sorry. Perhaps I am speaking too much, wearing my hat as a member for Brindabella. I am not aware of any schools in my electorate that are doing this, but I do know that there are some examples of this across the city.

Ms Oakey: I am aware of some. I know that Majura Primary School has had a kitchen garden for a long time and has had a composting system that goes with it. That is in Watson. I am pretty sure that Lyneham does too. I am sure there are quite a few others. I have to say, I am speaking of my own kind of local network there as well a little.

MR DAVIS: Please correct me if I am wrong, but I am sensing a theme not just from what you have said today but from people that we have had come before us previously in these public hearings that a lot of the really good stuff that is happening in our schools in terms of the management of infrastructure seems to be done at a school-by-school level. I suppose what I am growing concerned about and what I am interested to work out with you is how we can feed that best practice into the directorate and ensure that that becomes systemic across our entire schools.

Ms Oakey: Which is where I would hope an inquiry such as this would go, because I think that this is the opportunity. And it is more than even kitchen gardens. Kitchen gardens and growing vegetables and things like that are nice things to do and they are already happening, because they are nice things to do. Some schools choose to do them. But probably more seriously is: what are we doing about ensuring that schools are smoke proof? What are we doing to ensure that dust does not get in? When we have a dust storm roll in in two years time in the middle of drought from the central west and students' asthma is exacerbated, what are we doing to ensure that we are all meeting those standards? What are we doing to make sure that, when it is 45 degrees outside, people have somewhere safe to go?

There are some things that can start from the bottom up. Yes, we can see that school communities are ready for kitchen gardens and forest gardens because they are already doing it. But at a systemic level there is a role for the directorate to start looking at serious infrastructure issues, thinking about preparing for climate impacts, and for the worst-case-scenario season that we can imagine.

There is even a conversation potentially about when we actually are at school. When do we go to school? Which months of the year? What is going to happen to the seasons? When is a good time for children to be learning? When is a good time for them to be at home? If schools are going to be operating during a potentially worst-case-climate scenario, how do we keep children safe? Do they have to move outdoors to get from one part of the school to another part of the school? Is that safe for them to do that? Where do they go? Is there space for them all to be in some of those places?

What do we do when those conditions continue for more than just half a day, which is kind of what we imagine? We say, “It is a dust storm. It is half a day.” The smoke was not half a day; it was days and days and days of smoke before Christmas in 2019.

I think that is a very serious conversation that should be directorate driven, and I think that in the process of having that conversation then we can look at all those other things around living infrastructure, water sustainable design, gardens, sustainability and waste management.

MR DAVIS: Are you aware of any of the 40-odd member organisations that the Conservation Council represents who would be interested in engaging with the directorate in a formal way to provide their advice and some strategic direction? I guess what I am getting at here probably would not surprise you. I am trying to make sure that those in the community who know what they are talking about are feeding into government policy as much as possible. Do you believe there would be an appetite to do that?

Ms Oakey: Absolutely. We have certainly got expertise around the living infrastructure and what you could plant. We have native plant experts. We have grasslands experts. We have people who are waste experts in terms of how to live, how to minimise your waste and waste streams and composting. We have compost experts, biodegradability experts. We have bee pollinator experts and we have energy experts

MR DAVIS: So it is very specific?

Ms Oakey: Yes, we have a lot. There is a lot of expertise out there. And I think people would really enjoy this because I think people would see it as an opportunity and they would probably really enjoy having input into something that was, “We are going to do a sustainability plan for the next 20 years. Let us start thinking about it.”

I think the other thing, though, is that the climate impact stuff in particular needs to be whole of government, right across all government infrastructure, not just schools. And then probably the government needs to have a conversation with some of those other sectors that provide services to the community like the independent school sector and the Catholic Education Office. There will be other private service delivery throughout

the city.

On the climate impact stuff, it cannot just be government facilities that we make safe. I think the government has an obligation to make them safe going forward. But it is not just the government facilities that need to be safe. Obviously children that attend a whole range of schools need to be kept safe as well.

MR CAIN: If we had the education minister where you are sitting now what questions would you like us to ask her?

Ms Oakey: I think probably the thing that I am most interested in knowing is how much of this is directorate driven and how much of it is left up to individual schools—some clarity around that and whether the directorate has a sustainability plan going forward for schools—and then also what conversations have happened with other school sectors around investing in that.

The other thing I would be interested in knowing is how or what are the obligations that the ACT government may be able to put on independent schools in terms of their land tenure. You only have to get on Google Earth and start zooming in on some of these schools to see that some of the landscapes and the schoolgrounds are quite barren. There are not enough trees.

How do we engage with people who have got the private land tenure of the independent school sector and say, “You are sitting on a 50,000-square metre site”? I am sorry; I am not very good at hectares. I am a bit of a square metre girl. “You are sitting on 50,000 square metres but you have only got 10 trees.” How do we start a conversation with those private landowners, effectively, about how they can improve their land tenure to actually contribute to urban cooling and to contribute to urban biodiversity and to also manage waterways and runoff? School ovals are a classic problem because of the fertiliser that is used. We should be thinking about how we minimise runoff from schools from hard surfaces and from heavily fertilised places.

It is my guess that most schools do not think about themselves sitting in the landscape. They are thinking about themselves as their core business, which is provision of educational services, which is fair enough. That is their core business. But I think there are some real opportunities going forward to get schools to think a bit more broadly about how they sit within that landscape.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your time this afternoon on behalf of the Conservation Council. The secretary will provide you with a copy of the proof transcript of today’s hearing when it is available to check for accuracy. You have not taken any questions on notice, so the committee’s hearing for today is now adjourned. Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 2.02pm.