



**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 PETTERSSON (Chair)
MR J DAVIS (Deputy Chair)
MR P CAIN**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 8 JUNE 2021

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

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.

WITNESSES

BROWN, MS PENNY, Planning and Facilities Officer (Grant Administration),
Catholic Education Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn.....**36**

FOX, MR ROSS, Director, Catholic Education Archdiocese of Canberra and
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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 1.32 pm.

BROWN, MS PENNY, Planning and Facilities Officer (Grant Administration),
Catholic Education Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn

FOX, MR ROSS, Director, Catholic Education Archdiocese of Canberra and
Goulburn

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon and welcome to the third 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 Catholic Education. Please be aware that proceedings today are being recorded and will be transcribed and published by Hansard. Please be aware that today's proceedings are covered by parliamentary privilege, which provides protection to witnesses but also obliges them to tell the truth. The provision of false and misleading evidence is a serious matter and all participants today are reminded of this. Please ensure that you have read and understood the pink privilege statement.

Mr Fox: Yes, I have read and understood that.

Ms Brown: Yes, I have read and understood that.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. As there is no opening statement, I will lead off with questions and then we will make our way through the committee. First and foremost, thank you for coming in today. I read through your submission, and something that stood out to me—something that I think will be of great interest and importance to the community—is how Catholic schools are managing hazardous materials. I was wondering if you could give the committee an update as to how Catholic Education goes about that.

Mr Fox: Yes. I guess our regime is first and foremost about assuring and ensuring there are quality facilities, overall. To start with, as an example, every five years our schools go through a registration process. As part of that, we obviously look at teaching and learning and we look at other aspects of compliance, but we also do a condition assessment of the school. In the course of that, you are obviously identifying things like peeling paint and other aspects that might be of concern to occupational health and safety.

Now, in addition to that sort of five-yearly process supporting a registration process for each individual school, we also have five-yearly hazardous material inspections, broadly defined. Historically, that has really focused on the presence of asbestos and then informing a hazardous materials register as to the presence of asbestos. As we know, asbestos is only a problem if it is disturbed, but it is really important that we are aware of the presence of it so that if there are any works that occur they can be appropriately managed with the necessary precautions. So, really, probably in combination, we have the five-yearly registration process, generating a condition

report, and the five-yearly hazardous material inspection. Then, in addition to that, there are two other things. Obviously, we are inhabiting all our schools. We have a principal who can say, “I am seeing something outside of that regime that needs attention.” And we have a dedicated facilities and infrastructure team working centrally out of our office in Manuka supporting all of our 29 Catholic schools in the ACT to address issues that might come up. Some of those might be insurance claims, as per the hailstorm that Canberra experienced. That has obviously triggered a lot of work and, as you know, there has been a presence of asbestos in some cases.

So I would say that, in terms of the infrastructure and facilities, we have that regular cycle of inspection of the building and then registration of the appropriate hazardous materials. That then is put into the register. I guess the dominant thing we are talking about is that the hazard only arises when it is disturbed, so it is really knowing that it is there in the event that we do renovations, upgrades or further building works.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned that historically there had been a focus on asbestos.

Mr Fox: Yes.

THE CHAIR: What is the work that you do specifically to identify lead paint?

Mr Fox: There are a couple of things. Overall, we would say there was a huge injection in maintenance and capital works as a result of the Rudd government’s Building the Education Revolution, so our schools underwent significant upgrades. Then we have an ongoing upgrade and maintenance plan, including funding from the ACT government and the commonwealth government to support those capital works, refurbishment and new buildings. So we have done a lot of refurbishment and upgrades. We do not believe there is a significant issue with lead paint, because if it is present it has been encapsulated in recent paints. We have, in recent times, done sampling to ascertain the presence of lead paint, and we have had no lead paint detected.

So we are in the midst of reviewing the scope of that hazardous materials inspection to make sure that it is absolutely included and then that we are taking adequate precautions and measures to detect and then mitigate. But the evidence we have internally is that we have a mitigation strategy in terms of its being encapsulated or that we have done some spot detection and we have not detected any lead paint at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Seventy-five per cent of your schools were built before 1990, a time when asbestos and lead paint were far more commonplace. Do you know how many Catholic schools have these hazardous materials in them?

Mr Fox: Well, I do not have that number, in terms of asbestos, offhand. I can certainly take that number on notice if that is of interest.

THE CHAIR: It would be. I do not necessarily want the individual school names—I do not want to go down that path—but the total number would be good.

Mr Fox: Out of 29, sure. We are happy to provide that. We just need to check the

precise records in the hazardous materials register with respect to lead paint. I am confident that it will have very clear identification of asbestos because of the nature of the material. So we can provide whatever information is available with respect to the 29 schools.

THE CHAIR: If you are a parent at a Catholic school, what is the process for seeing—I think this is what it is called—the hazardous register at the front office?

Mr Fox: It is kept at the front office and any parent in theory could ask to see it. I guess we have an example which has been widely reported, which speaks to this—the situation at St Thomas Aquinas Primary School in Charnwood, where a parent raised the question about possible contamination on the school grounds arising from a previously adjacent fire station. That triggered us to conduct testing to clarify for the parent whether there was a basis to any concerns. It is also the case that at any time, parents can raise with the principal or the office concerns over the presence of hazardous materials. Then obviously we would follow up and check and confirm that there are appropriate mitigation strategies in place.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful.

MR CAIN: I have a supplementary question on that. I drive by St Thomas Aquinas school not infrequently. I have noticed there are sections of the playing area or recreational area that are sectioned off.

Mr Fox: Yes.

MR CAIN: What percentage of your students' outdoor areas are currently unavailable to them, roughly?

Mr Fox: It is very, very substantial. It is in the vicinity of 70 per cent. I do not have the precise numbers but, yes, it is certainly more than half. It is a very substantial area. It has been widely publicised and highly scrutinised. It is highly precautionary. The fenced area does not relate to the scope of contamination but is seen as a precaution in advance. We sort of believe that there are imminent works to rectify the situation in case there is any contaminated material there, and we are working through with the department, the EPA, and the consultants that the department has engaged to put in place a mitigation strategy, which we think will remove the risk for all students and staff.

MR CAIN: Who has advised you on which parts to section off, even though you might say it is precautionary?

Mr Fox: We had a significantly smaller area sectioned off, and that was done in conjunction with the consultants who had conducted and overseen the testing. Since that time, roughly since the start of the year, we have been preparing for rectification works—in this case, putting down additional soil and putting down additional turf, and then there has to be appropriate drainage and a geofabric. All that specification has been signed off by the appropriate qualified consultants, with the oversight of the department and the EPA. Since the time when we were planning those works it has been fenced off, partly in anticipation that it is going to be a building site and partly to

remove any residual risk.

MR CAIN: Who is bearing the cost of remediation works?

Mr Fox: The government is, to the extent that it is required to remediate. We are taking the opportunity then to install some additional amenities—level playing surfaces and some irrigation. That is important to us because we see that it is really important for the parents and the school community to get a longer-term benefit out of this significant inconvenience in the longer term—the longer-term benefit; not the longer-term inconvenience. All those specifications, unfortunately, then have to be ticked off by the engineers and the EPA, which has made it a longer process than hoped. We are meeting some of the portion, which reflects improving the amenity of the area, but the costs of the remediation works are being met by the ACT government.

MR CAIN: How are the students being compensated for the loss of that amenity? Are there any other areas that they have to go to, and what is the inconvenience of that?

Mr Fox: There has been, as with schools, practical local arrangements. It means that the playing areas are significantly more crowded than they normally would be. There is also, though, a carpark adjacent to the church, which is across the way, which is available to use. It is not ideal, but it is available subject to the pressures that they are experiencing. Look, it is okay, but I would say that the community's expectation for it to be resolved is increasing.

MR CAIN: Do you have a timeline for that?

Mr Fox: Well, no. At the moment, we acknowledge the best efforts of everyone involved, and we do not have a definite timeline. Our contractors are ready to commence. It is also a little bit complicated because we have received funding at Charnwood. We have an early learning centre as part of the school or adjacent to the school. That was the first early learning centre that Catholic Education opened. We are now building a dedicated facility, with the support of the ACT government's capital funding. That has been held up because it overlaps a small portion of the area that has been identified as contaminated and which they are looking to remediate. So you cannot start the earthworks until that is ticked off and moved.

So, in effect, what is going to happen is that they are going to move a small portion of soil into another area and cover it. Then we can get on with the early learning centre, which is a dedicated facility which will be, I think, highly valued by the community. But that is also being held up at the moment because obviously you cannot start earthworks until you are confident of where the soil is going, what the remediation is and what the mitigation is et cetera. It is appropriate that there are precautions and an assessment of risk; it is just that there is building frustration that it takes a lot of time. There are a lot of people involved who are all very expert, but unfortunately we have not been able to progress it as we had hoped.

MR CAIN: From when has this 70 per cent area been unavailable?

Mr Fox: Roughly the start of the year—in the range of February.

MR CAIN: This year?

Mr Fox: Yes.

MR DAVIS: I have a supplementary question. Mr Fox, I am just curious. You mentioned that the ACT government is meeting the expense of remediating the hazardous material at the Charnwood school campus.

Mr Fox: Yes.

MR DAVIS: Can you talk me through how that agreement came to be?

Mr Fox: Yes, sure.

MR DAVIS: How is the ACT government footing the bill?

Mr Fox: The situation, as I understand it, is that the PFAS came to be there, it is assumed, because of the fire station that was adjacent to the site.

MR DAVIS: You have to forgive me; I have not been here long enough to speak in acronyms. What is the PFAS?

Mr Fox: PFAS is a chemical. It is per-fluoro-something, something.

MR DAVIS: Right; it is the material we are speaking about.

Mr Fox: Sorry, not one singular material; it is a set of chemicals which—

MR DAVIS: I see.

MR CAIN: It is a firefighting foam or something like that.

Mr Fox: Yes. It has been generated in this instance, they think, because of firefighting foam.

MR DAVIS: I see.

Mr Fox: Yes. Obviously, we know a lot more about PFAS now than we might have hoped or expected. The concern with it is not that there is any evidence that it causes health issues; the evidence that is clear is that it accumulates in the body if you are exposed to it. There is a concern that there is an unknown effect of the accumulation.

MR DAVIS: Right. And these were substances that were on the site prior to your school being there? Is that why the ACT government accepted some liability?

Mr Fox: Yes, that is right. There is no dispute that the presence of those chemicals is likely to have or definitely occurred because of the firefighting service activity. For example, the reason 70 per cent—or in that vicinity—of the playground is fenced off is that when we did some random testing through the site, we that found an area of something like 3 metres by 3 metres had an unexpectedly high reading of the presence

of this set of chemicals called PFAS. At least the superficial suggestion is that from time to time the firefighters would do drills and things where they might have had an 80-gallon drum—or whatever the drum size was—lit a fire, and then practised putting it out and with foam. So my understanding is that it arises mainly from foams—or has in the past.

The suggestion is that maybe it was common that they put a drum there and they extinguished fires in this very small part. But it was totally anomalous and unexpected that we found the presence of it. Just to clarify, our understanding is that in order for PFAS to accumulate you have to consume it quite a lot. Airborne consumption of PFAS is almost, apparently, unheard of—I am not a medical expert, but this is what has been advised—so the risk from airborne consumption is, we are told, non-existent.

In order for it to accumulate in the body, you would actually have to consume, literally, something in the vicinity of 150 to 200 grams at least of soil a day repeatedly for some time. So on a couple of occasions we have met with, and received advice from, the Chief Health Officer Kerryn Coleman, about her assessment. Obviously if you talk to parents, they say, “My child has a tendency to put things in their mouth”—they play in the mud, they play with water in the mud and do all of those expected things that you encourage adventurous children to do. But that is not related to the possibility of PFAS accumulating in your body because you have to have significant consumption. The cases or areas where they are most concerned about this is where PFAS is mobile in water and then people are drinking lots of the water or they are eating fruit and vegetables that are grown in that water. Apparently, there are certain fruits and vegetables which are more likely to accumulate PFAS.

MR DAVIS: On the subject of who is paying for what, you mentioned that the school is also investing in some additional capital works.

Mr Fox: Yes.

MR DAVIS: Can I just confirm, then, that the ACT government is meeting the bill only for the remediation of the hazardous material?

Mr Fox: Yes, that is right.

MR DAVIS: And your organisation or the school in other ways is meeting the cost of—

Mr Fox: Yes. As an act of goodwill and to support the school community, and the system we maintain, the system reserves are meeting the costs of that additional amenity.

MR DAVIS: In item 1.8 of your submission you mention:

CECG would welcome any support that the ACT government commits to providing to address hazardous materials in schools—

and the part I am particularly interested in—

particularly on an equitable basis across both government and non-government school systems.

Mr Fox: Yes.

MR DAVIS: I refer you, then, to point 1.11, where you note that the Canberra Catholic Schools Building Fund exists, where parents can make voluntary tax-deductible donations to support school maintenance. Such a fund where parents could make tax deductible contributions for public schools is not one that I am aware of.

Mr Fox: Yes.

MR DAVIS: I just wondered if you mind talking me through what you would consider to be equitable?

Mr Fox: Yes, sure. My understanding, in order of magnitude, is that last year, amongst our 29 schools, we undertook something like \$13 million in capital works. About \$7 million of it is completed and there is about \$6 million underway. I am talking about the 2020 year, just for convenience. So the costs of our capital works and the maintenance are significantly funded by parents. One view would be that our parents are enthusiastic ACT community members and therefore merit the same sort of support that those parents and students who attend ACT government schools enjoy. Now, at the moment, we have made arrangements because there is not that capital support that exists.

Of any school system in Australia—of any jurisdiction you can visit—Catholic schools in the ACT are most similar to government schools; government schools are most similar in the socioeconomic background and spread of students. In other jurisdictions the systems can be a little bit different—sometimes quite different—but in the ACT, that is not the case. It is very likely that if you cross the road from a Catholic school to the government school, the backgrounds of the students are very similar.

MR DAVIS: Do you have any data on that, that you would be able to provide the committee, even on notice?

Mr Fox: Yes, sure.

MR DAVIS: I am not aware of those figures.

Mr Fox: Yes. We do not maintain socioeconomic background data on government schools but there is a website called My School administered by the Australian Curriculum Assessment Reporting Authority. They maintain a socioeconomic background measure for every school, called the index of community socio-educational advantage, ICSEA. If you look at the average ICSEA for government schools and the average ICSEA for Catholic schools, the number is almost identical, whereas in other jurisdictions it is somewhat different. We can certainly provide those figures for the benefit of the committee and its work.

MR DAVIS: That would be great.

Mr Fox: That would be one perspective—that as enthusiastic ACT residents and as

taxpayers, there is a question as to whether we are starting a significant way back in terms of the contributions that we need from parents to maintain our schools. Therefore, the parents' views of what is equitable may well be significantly more—something reflecting close to what the ACT government is able to support in government schools.

MR DAVIS: Could I put a potentially controversial view to you? I am interested in your takes.

Mr Fox: Yes.

MR DAVIS: If I were to say that it is the ACT government's first responsibility to maintain its own building infrastructure and there is, by virtue of this inquiry existing, some community concern that that expectation is not being met in ACT public schools, would you think it would be fair for the ACT ratepayer, through their government, to contribute to non-government schools before works are completed at government schools?

Mr Fox: I would say that every student deserves high-quality facilities. I do not think that funding for non-government schools should be at the expense of government schools. If there is an issue in government schools in hazardous materials or whatever else, it is appropriate that that is rectified, that it is addressed, and that those issues are appropriately funded and resourced. But I do not see that that necessitates cutting funding, reducing funding or having no funding for non-government schools. There are various needs measures incorporated into our funding. There is significant need in the Catholic sector. At the moment—this is for facilities—it is overwhelmingly met by parent contributions. As you say, we have some arrangements to provide tax deductibility for the contributions to the voluntary building fund. I would not see that it is necessarily the case that further needs or spending in government schools necessitates reducing or impeding support for genuine needs in the non-government sector—whatever sector that might be, Catholic or other.

MR DAVIS: Of course. I ask because currently the ACT government is not contributing, with the exception of the school in Charnwood, any money towards the remediation of hazardous material in Catholic schools.

Mr Fox: Yes. Obviously, under the circumstances where it is attributable to activity by the ACT government in whatever form of agency, yes, that is right; there is no explicit support.

MR DAVIS: Of course. That is why I am trying to really get to the bottom of how you are defining “equitable” in point 1.8 of your submission. Would it be fair to say, then, that “equitable” would be the ACT government contributing to the cost of remediating hazardous materials in non-government schools once it has met its obligation to do so in all government schools? Are you seeing that as a “yes and”?

Mr Fox: I think it is important that all students attend a school that is safe.

MR DAVIS: Naturally.

Mr Fox: So if it is the case that there are hazardous materials which raise a question as to that safety, then that should be addressed. If that is disproportionately government schools, then I am comfortable that that is an appropriate priority. I guess there are sorts of scenarios that that equitable basis might also address. From time to time, in terms of compliance, there can be changing government regulations. For example, there is no problem with asbestos being present in building fabric at the moment; it is when it is disturbed that it creates an issue. But it is possible—it is not proposed—that the government takes a view that all asbestos should be removed, and obviously that generates a positive cost on us, whereas at the moment, we replace it and mitigate it as we update or renovate. So at the moment, it does not represent a massive impost—a significant impost—although I understand the costs of dealing with it can be somewhat inflated. But if it was the case that any change to the regulation or compliance was made so that we needed to immediately deal with it, then we would say that the definition of “equitable basis” means that if you have created a new obligation, it would be good to support the compliance with that.

MR DAVIS: This is my last supplementary question, I promise. Are you confident that, without any contribution from the ACT government, CECG would have the funds available to ensure all of your schools are safe from hazardous material?

Mr Fox: Yes.

MR DAVIS: Great.

Mr Fox: Yes. We are able to prioritise. So if it is the case that we find lots more hazardous material that we have to remediate, it is going to mean we cannot do other things. We will reprioritise or we will delay other renovations, other constructions. But, yes, it is the case that at the moment—from our understanding of the challenges and our understanding of the needs—we have the capacity to do that.

MR DAVIS: Thank you.

MR CAIN: Are you happy to continue for a few minutes longer?

Mr Fox: Sure.

MR CAIN: Regarding new school opportunities, I note a comment about your seeking sites in the newer areas of Canberra.

Mr Fox: Yes.

MR CAIN: Have you observed a change in policy for allocation of sites for non-government schools in recent times or are you finding that you have different challenges in finding land to establish a non-government site?

Mr Fox: I am not an expert in the area, but I can share my experience. Historically, my understanding is that sites for schools, including government schools and non-government schools, were determined with significant input from the education department or that there was significant control over that process. I have now been in the role of Director of Catholic Education in Canberra and Goulburn for coming on

four and a half years. In that time, there has been talk of the new non-government school at Molonglo, at Wright, being offered. It finally went to a request for an RFP process and now we are in a request for tender process.

So we are participating in that, and that is all now being run by the planning department, on the understanding that you are doing a broader provision for all community facilities. My experience or my impression, not having been in the role for longer than four and a half years, is that that change has made it harder for non-government schools to participate with certainty in obtaining land and then providing for the community. It might not be intended, and it might also be the result of reasonable and appropriate changes to government processes to best provide for the community. The result is that we have not been able to plan a non-government school, and we cannot until the request for tender process is complete—and there is another party participating in that.

Like government schools, we are experiencing significant enrolment pressure in the Gungahlin area. We have just concluded our enrolment period for 2022. All of our schools in Gungahlin, Harrison, Nicholls and Amaroo have more applications than we can take. We know that the new schools and current schools in Gungahlin, in the government sector, are also experiencing significant enrolment pressure. With the new government school opening in Molonglo, we are not in a position to provide education at the moment. We are hopeful that if we are successful in that request for tender process, we will be able to build a school and provide for the community. We know that there are long periods in terms of planning, construction and then enrolment. So we have not been able to participate.

We know that there is a sort of land release program, but at the moment the process is such that it does not provide much certainty to us. We believe that there are a reasonable number of families—as there are across Canberra—who seek a non-government education and a Catholic education, and we would like to be able to provide that in the communities in which they live.

MR CAIN: And how have your concerns—let us call them—been answered by the government?

Mr Fox: My understanding is that the current process we are involved in is a novel one. It is, I understand, the first piece of land for a non-government school that has been done in this way. So perhaps there is a learning experience for the department and ultimately the government. Certainly, the process, as I understand it, is designed to achieve the best community amenity. So there are expectations on us, if we are successful, to incorporate into the school facilities that are available to the wider community, whether it is sports facilities or performing arts facilities. That all adds to the cost, obviously, of the proposed development, but ultimately it will add to the amenity for the community.

THE CHAIR: I have got one quick question. I note that it has been a few years since you have built a new school.

Mr Fox: Yes.

THE CHAIR: When it comes to building new facilities, where does Catholic Education go to look for best practice in design?

Mr Fox: That is a good question. I guess we are aware of current trends. I would say that there are no settled views on some aspects of school design. Penny might be able to speak to this in a minute. Obviously, we are after very high environmental standards in terms of heating and cooling, not only because they are efficient buildings but also because it provides great opportunities for our students to learn about energy efficiency and other issues. Many of our schools have solar panels and monitoring devices, and that provides an opportunity for science curriculum learning about energy consumption and about things you can do to adapt. That is really important to us. The environmental principles of our schools are really, really important. That can be expensive, but in the longer term it is absolutely the right thing to do.

The other observation, though, is that there are, from time to time, discussions about open classrooms and those sorts of trends. We are very clear at the moment that one of the important things in classrooms is attention or focus for the students. It is analogous, I think—if you indulge me for a second—to some of the evidence around open plan workspaces: that the issue actually is visual distractions. So our experience currently with some of the learning and teaching initiatives is that great work has been done to take away big walls and put glass in so you have open sight lines, safe classrooms and more light coming in, but that can mean there are more distractions for the students when they are trying to learn. So we have to find the right balance. Students need the ability to concentrate and focus—to have attentional focus on the task they are learning. Many of our schools—for example, the school at Harrison—now have formal classrooms and then have the breakout spaces, which are wonderful for collaborate group work and creative engagement.

So we want to find the right balance to that. Ultimately, you need very flexible spaces because we are not sitting in rows of desks all the time. That is absolutely not what is going on, but it is an important part of that attentional focus and of instruction, so we do not want to stop that. We would probably be wary of fads that people might pursue, because we do not want to be experimenting with children, but we do need to incorporate the best environmental principles and then the most flexible arrangements so that we can adapt the classrooms to the pedagogy and to the needs of the students. Do you want to add anything, given your networks in this area?

Ms Brown: Yes. In addition to that, on all our projects we seek advice from relevant consultants, architects, engineers and the like. We are also part of a committee called Learning Environments Australasia. As part of that, we are meeting regularly with experts in the field. We are meeting with designers and also teachers, educators. As part of that, you are trying to align education styles—pedagogies and things like that—with design aspects.

You are taking various experts' opinions and trying to align them through the various ways that Ross has mentioned in terms of flexibility and having collaborative spaces where there can be specific learning styles that meet all the different types of pedagogies. In terms of all the open plan types of spaces, we need to ensure we have appropriate acoustics in place to reduce the distraction for the students. We also

consider the long-term sustainability and costings of the projects.

MR CAIN: I have a quick supplementary. You mentioned Harrison school, but are there any new-build schools, either in the ACT or in the close jurisdictions, that reflect the practices that you think are best in the light of new considerations like environment, heating and cooling and pedagogy?

Mr Fox: I do not think that the buildings are an absolute barrier to high-quality learning and teaching. You can have a very good school in very old buildings, and I think we have some of those in both the public sector and the Catholic sector. The most recent construction that we have done is St John Paul II College in Nicholls. That has very high environmental standards. It is based around a self-directed learning model, so there is lots of time where students are setting their own learning goals and pursuing those. If you were interested, that is certainly one mode of learning that is appreciated by the community and is successful.

But if you then visit our other secondary colleges—our other four systemic secondary colleges—you will not see similar things, because they are around more formal classrooms, by and large, with breakout areas. So we would say that the pedagogy adapts. For example, St Clare’s College in Griffith is currently replacing its library with what is described as a learning commons. It is quite common. It is more of an agile study area for senior students. You do not need the whole school to be designed a certain way. I would say that you need a variety of different spaces to suit the particular learning goals and objectives of the teachers and the students at any time. I think our schools do a really good job of that, overall.

As another example, I was at St Francis Xavier College in Florey recently. They have a fantastic design and engineering program. They have won international competitions on robotic soccer—the International RoboCup. When I visited, the students were just preparing for this very sophisticated competition where they design and build a miniature racer. They have marketing aspects and design aspects to it. They have simulations of—what is it called?—an air tunnel. They simulate an air tunnel across the car so that they can design it to go faster. It is amazingly complicated compared to when I was at school. It is almost unimaginable. So all of this is going on and that requires a dedicated space that is not an open plan area. It is not a warehouse; it is not a classroom; it is something else. So we do need a combination of agile spaces to support these amazing learning endeavours.

MR DAVIS: Have we got time for one more question?

THE CHAIR: If you are very quick.

Mr Fox: Yes, sure.

MR DAVIS: It is just a quick one. There are just two points in your submission that seem to me to be a bit of a contradiction. I was hoping you could talk me through them.

Mr Fox: Sure.

MR DAVIS: At 1.20 you say that you would welcome additional land releases in new or existing suburbs for the establishment of non-government schools.

Mr Fox: Yes.

MR DAVIS: Now, establishing a new school is a terribly expensive task; I do not need to tell you. At point 1.21 you say that you continue to face challenges to provide sufficient funds to manage the upkeep of school buildings across the ACT. I just wonder if now is the best time to be investing in building new schools while you continue to have a challenge to fund and manage the upkeep of the ones that you have.

Mr Fox: I would say, again, that not an either/or situation; we hope it is a both/and situation. We are fortunate to live in a wonderful territory. We are part of that community. It is growing. People are, more and more, discovering what a wonderful place the ACT and Canberra is to live in. That means there are more school-aged children. Historically, the ACT has had a very high share of students in the non-government sector, and my understanding is that it is a longstanding legacy from the formation of Canberra, when you had a lot of public servants moving to Canberra with families. The commonwealth government, who had responsibility for it, had to step in and build a lot of schools. The government could not do it all themselves and they partnered with the non-government sector.

So we have a fine tradition where we work in close partnership with the government sector—the ACT government and, before that, the commonwealth—to provide high-quality education. We just see these growing areas—whether it is Molonglo or in the future Ginninderry—where, if there is not a non-government school, there will be either more traffic on the roads or a lot more provision needed from the public sector. Now, that is a legitimate choice for government to make, but we think that we are valued in other parts of the community and we work alongside our government colleagues really well, so we would like the option.

As we said elsewhere, parents contribute a significant part of the capital and maintenance costs that we experience, and they would ultimately be contributing a significant amount to establishing both the community facilities, as part of the school, and the school. So we think it is the right thing to do because it is certainly a reality that the parents in Catholic Education today in Canberra did not pay for the schools they are enjoying. They were paid for by generations before them. So we would want the current parents to be thinking of the future generations in suburbs where Catholics schools do not yet exist and hopefully provide the opportunity of a Catholic education for them.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Unfortunately, we are out of time. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Catholic Education for your time this afternoon. The secretary will provide you with a copy of the proof transcript of today's hearing when it is available. If you have taken any questions on notice—I think you have taken two—could you please liaise with the committee secretary to provide those answers. The committee's hearing for today is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 2.16 pm.