



**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, 6 JULY 2021

**Acting secretary to the committee:
Dr C Regan (Ph: 620 50142)**

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

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 1.30pm.

MERRY, MR SHANE, Treasurer, Harrison School Parents and Community Association

EDWARDS, MRS PENELOPE LARA, Chair, Preschool Subcommittee, Majura Primary School Parents and Citizens Association

ROWLEY, MR DANIEL, Convenor, Majura Primary School Parents and Citizens Association

COE, MS CATHERINE, Secretary, Latham Primary Parents and Community Association

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon and welcome to the fifth 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 that they make to the life of the 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.

During the proceedings today we will hear evidence from the following organisations: Latham Primary Parents and Community Association, Harrison School Parents and Community Association and Majura Primary School Parents and Citizens Association. Please be aware that proceedings today are being recorded and will be transcribed and published by Hansard. Proceedings are also being broadcast and web-streamed live. When taking questions on notice, it would be useful if witnesses use the words, "I will take that as a question taken on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice in the transcript. 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 in front of you. Could you each acknowledge that you have read that. I can see that you have all said yes. Perfect. We have some opening statements. I might start at the top. Mr Merry, do you have an opening statement?

Mr Merry: Thank you for providing me the opportunity to present today on behalf of Harrison School Parent and Community Association. I am the treasurer and grants coordinator. Harrison school is probably one of the biggest schools in the territory. In preschool to year 10 at the last census we had 1,960 students between the ages of four years and 16 years. It has also been known that we have got the largest Defence Force family presence in Australia, and that was sitting at 22 per cent last census. So it is quite a transient facility; nonetheless, there are some streaming issues that I have seen in my time.

To give you an idea, I have only been attached to the school for the past two years, but, being on the P&C, I have seen some significant growth. One large issue that we have been speaking to the government about, first of all, is the traffic and safety issues. In Wimmera Street in Harrison you have three schools—Mother Theresa School,

Harrison day care and Harrison school. So you have close to 3,000 students in that area, and a lot of the day care are attached to the Harrison school and Mother Theresa school. So you can imagine it is quite diabolical—probably one of the words I have used.

We have had a lot of feedback from parents about near misses and parents using alleyways or townhouse entry and exit points to get around. At the moment, we have a consultant who has been engaged by Transport Canberra, so we will wait to hear in that regard. Our other concern is that we are at quite a large capacity, but the feedback we keep hearing, which is quite alarming, is that there are other schools opening up nearby, but that does not help our cause at the moment. To give you a perfect example, last year we had 80 pre-schoolers, who were attached to the school already, who had to go to preschool at Franklin School around the corner. Therefore, parents had to go to two different locations because we did not have the room for pre-schoolers. And then the idea is: do they stay at Franklin or do they then become Harrison School students? As a parent you do not want your two children at two different locations.

We have quite an issue in regard to multi-purpose rooms, because they are not multi-purpose—they have been converted to classrooms and are permanent. We have kids having English lessons in our hall because there is just no room at all. I do not understand that as we have quite large amount of land in and around the school; however, I think it has been underutilised. I have been told that there are two other schools opening up. That is not really comforting, because, as I said in my opening statement, it has a larger Defence Force family presence. Harrison, the suburb, has probably one of the largest Defence Force family presences in the territory; therefore, we are going to have those students coming through. The only way is up for this school, and we need to work on infrastructure, capital works and traffic issues.

My last point is that it is also taking a backwards step in terms of our P&C and our operation because there are some things that we cannot do. We run the canteen. It is a significant business operation. All funds go back to the school; however, we are limited in the way we operate due to the fact that our canteen is too small. Also our out-of-school-hours bush club is at capacity. We cannot even allow pre-schoolers to go to after-school care because we simply do not have the room. We have the staff, but we do not have the room. Yes, we predict that we lose between \$7,000 and \$10,000 a year just on canteen revenue due to us not being able to operate at full capacity.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Merry.

Mrs Edwards: I am the chair of the preschool subcommittee of Majura Primary Parents and Citizens Association. Good afternoon, chair and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today on behalf of the Majura Primary School Parents and Citizens Association.

Majura Primary has experienced exponential growth in the order of 36 per cent over the past five years. In 2015, enrolments were 503 K to year 6 students, rising to 684 in 2020. The forecast growth for enrolments to 2030 is another 34 per cent increase to 918 students. This will be almost double 2015 enrolment numbers. We have been pleased, since we made our submission to the inquiry, to have had some engagement

with the directorate when they recognised that our problem was enduring. We are yet to be advised of any solutions to the problems our school faces. We would welcome a holistic plan to manage school facilities and infrastructure based on enrolment forecasts and the age and reasonable lifespan of school infrastructure.

In our experience, the approach to dealing with enrolment growth has been incremental and piecemeal. At the beginning of 2019, two classes at Majura had to be housed in the performing arts room, due to a failure to forecast growth and to move the NSET team, which is a non-student team, out of two classrooms that they were occupying in the school. At the beginning of 2021, four classes were accommodated across the library and performing arts room, due to the installation of transportables being delayed. The transportables were only secured late in the previous year, even though it was clear from the 2019 experience that capacity was a problem. Those four transportable classrooms currently house four classes, so their installation only addressed the immediate rather than the longer-term issue. The consequence is that parents feel that planning is not driven by longer-term strategy that is based on accurate or reliable forecasts of enrolment pressures.

Parents also get weary of constantly needing to advocate for more classes for students, or the protection of specialist teaching spaces, and they become very suspicious, despite repeated assurances to the contrary, that spaces like the library, performing arts room or teacher resource spaces will be converted into classrooms—in part because they have seen this happen at other schools.

Using an overall number for capacity rather than the number of classrooms required is flawed. Overall capacity numbers do not take account of varying maximum class sizes across different year groups. We urge the directorate to ensure that capacity calculations consider the number of classes required at each school, rather than a head count. This allows for planning to reflect the actual number of classes that will be needed, rather than the maximum amount of children a school can house.

As schools grow, the focus should not only be on the provision of teaching space but should consider the consequential impacts increased enrolments present. Growing schools also need consideration of non-classroom infrastructure—larger staff rooms; more spaces for teachers to do co-planning or lesson co-design; a larger hall; additional playground equipment, especially if you have lost playgrounds to transportable classes; room for additional administration staff; consideration of the need to extend specialist teaching spaces to ensure access for the whole school; and the negative impacts on traffic and parking at the school.

While our submission has primarily focused on the issue of capacity, ageing infrastructure, lack of disability access and poor playground space are also problems. However, our most pressing need is to ensure the school has enough classrooms to house prospective students. We would like to ensure that our school facilitates learning and teaching in an environment that promotes modern teaching practices. Each individual school is a significant asset in terms of the value of the land and the building. It seems that in general it is left up to principals and school boards to manage the maintenance and upkeep of the school within the existing budget, but this approach does not account for the need to undertake significant expansion or modernisation works across school sites based on ageing infrastructure or enrolment

growth. These capital investments are likely to be extensive, and therefore exceed any individual school budget. We recommend that the directorate develops a multi-year management plan for all public school sites and that it outlines a time frame for investment in upgrading facilities and expanding capacity as needed for all schools.

School communities would welcome insight into when large-scale capital investment in their sites will be forthcoming. Developing a multi-year plan removes the need for each school to compete for investment within the limited funding pool, as it provides a considered and structured investment pathway that prioritises need and is more equitable. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs Edwards. I will just double check that there are no more opening statements.

Ms Coe: No.

THE CHAIR: I will lead off with questions and we will make our way down the line. The questions might be specifically to your school or might be broader questions that everyone can chime in on. Starting off, Ms Coe, I was wondering if you could talk about some of the infrastructure problems at your school, Latham, particularly in reference to hazardous materials?

Ms Coe: Latham has a number of hazardous materials present on site. We know that we have asbestos on site. We have lead paint, which has been found in very old heaters that are, sort of, scattered throughout the school. But probably one of the most significant ones we have is the asbestos-coated pipes underneath our oval. At the moment, they have effectively rendered the oval unusable for portions of the year. I will give you a bit of background, which I think we cover in our submission. I will just quickly go over it. The Latham oval originally had an underground watering system. It was decommissioned a number of years ago after it stopped working and we are unable to remove it because all of the pipes underneath the ground are coated in asbestos. That has interfered with us being able to use the oval, because it dries out during summer in Canberra, with its wonderful climate. Hence, we have effectively an unusable outdoor space. We do have ovals next door to Latham—there are playing fields right next door to the school—but obviously taking children outside of school gates and things, during school hours, is not always feasible—and not for every recess and lunch.

They are also, as I understand it, interfering with us being able to put in demountables, because part of that area would be where we want to put demountables. We cannot dig down into the ground because there are asbestos pipes down there. I believe the figure that was bandied around when we were looking at getting them removed was in excess of \$1 million dollars. For a school with 395 students from preschool to year 6, it is well beyond the capacity of the school. We also have this wonderful little building up at the top of the school, which actually sits outside the fencing. We have named it the community hub. It is sort of shared between the Latham P&C and YMCA, which runs the after-school care program at Latham. That has lead paint. We know that it has asbestos flooring that has to be removed. I believe that is in the process of being removed, but the cost of replacing the flooring up there is \$20,000, which is pretty much the entirety of the grant that the Latham P&C got to upgrade the

entire hub. So, yes, there are issues there.

THE CHAIR: What has the school community's engagement with the Education Directorate been like throughout this process? Have you been well informed throughout this process?

Ms Coe: There is a report at the front of the school that I believe anyone can go and view and the principal has certainly reached out to the school, but in terms of direct communication from the Education Directorate, zero. They do not communicate with us. They go through the principals, and all of the communication falls to the schools. I understand that there is this focus on schools' independence because principals and educational leaders understand what their schools need, but I think that there is also a role for leadership in the Education Directorate, and that seems to be lacking at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR CAIN: In terms of trying to get your voice heard, I suppose—for want of a better way of saying it—has the P&C written directly to the directorate and requested a consultation opportunity?

Ms Coe: Sorry, the P&C?

MR CAIN: Yes.

Ms Coe: No, we have not. We have been speaking with the principal. The principal does most of the communication for us, and we work really closely with our principal. We get along really well; I have actually known her for a number of years, even prior to being at Latham. So, yes, it is just, sort of, a work in progress.

I should also probably say that most of the members here on the Latham P&C are new, so we are trying to pick up. I think the P&C got a bit burnt out last year during COVID just trying to keep going with things. It is quite a small school and we also have capacity issues among the parents. At the moment I would say we probably do not have the level of engagement that we want. There are a lot of people who are struggling, post COVID, just to get past the year that was 2020.

Our principal has repeatedly told us that we know there are families that are doing it tough in the school community. So, yes, the Education Directorate is aware that these asbestos pipes are there; they know about the lead paint; they know about the asbestos flooring in the hub. It just feels as if everything takes so long. I know that government is not exactly known for setting a cracking pace, but it could go a little faster maybe.

MR DAVIS: Just a supplementary on this. I am interested in exploring the community hub a little bit more, because I am not familiar with it and I am always interested in situations where schools have facilities that also have a community benefit. The committee has heard some evidence from community groups that utilise school spaces, and sometimes that is less than an ideal arrangement. Who exactly owns the community hub?

Ms Coe: It is part of the school grounds, so it belongs to the school.

MR DAVIS: Okay. And it is a space that the P&C has been given to manage?

Ms Coe: We got a grant basically to upgrade it, and the idea was to make it a space for the Latham community. So some of the things, I think, that were envisioned were having it open during the day to have some mums and bubs sessions. There are other schools—Southern Cross Early Childhood School, for example—that run programs like that, where we try to bring in the school community and have them in the school just to sort of build those connections and create a space where people can go. So I think the P&C last year applied for that grant and got it to upgrade it, but, yes, it is \$20,000 and that is the cost of the flooring at the moment.

MR DAVIS: Who provided the grant?

Ms Coe: I probably would have to take that on notice, actually.

MR DAVIS: That is all right. And you said that it is currently utilised by the YWCA for an after-school program, as well?

Ms Coe: YMCA.

MR DAVIS: YMCA; my mistake. I assume they pay rent to the P&C or to the school.

Ms Coe: I assume they pay it to the school, but I do not know, I am sorry. I could take that on notice too, but I am not sure, because their agreement, I think, would be with the school.

MR DAVIS: Sounds good. Do you have quotes for fixing the asbestos flooring?

Ms Coe: Yes, and I believe that the directorate has agreed to remove the flooring, but replacing it has fallen to the P&C. At least that was the last news that we had, but I could go back to the team that is managing the grant and ask them for an update.

MR DAVIS: I would be interested in the timeline of when the directorate agreed to take responsibility for removing the floor and how much time has passed since the directorate knew that there was asbestos flooring and today. I understand the asbestos flooring is still there.

Ms Coe: Yes. It certainly was when we broke for school holidays.

MR DAVIS: Yes, fair enough. I am happy for you to take that on notice, but I would be interested in the time between when the directorate knew that that was asbestos flooring and have allowed that situation to continue. That would be interesting too. I have a couple of substantive clarifying questions for Harrison and for Majura, based on your opening statements. I will start with Mr Merry, if that is okay.

Mr Merry: Yes.

MR DAVIS: In your opening statement, you mention that you have a lot of

under-utilised land. You will have to forgive me; I am a member for Brindabella and I do not often hear “under-utilised land” and “Gungahlin” in the same sentence.

Mr Merry: Yes.

MR DAVIS: This committee has also had a lot of evidence from school communities that have varying degrees of appetite to have their space occupied by new classrooms, but it sounds as if that is something—given your growing pains at Harrison school—that you might be open to. You have identified some space where you would be happy for new infrastructure to be built. Is that fair?

Mr Merry: Yes, I believe that there have been conversations with infrastructure and capital works in that regard—that there is space where you could, you know, add a storey on.

MR DAVIS: So we are not talking about building new classrooms on green space?

Mr Merry: Yes.

MR DAVIS: We are talking about going up?

Mr Merry: Yes.

MR DAVIS: Okay. How much consultation has the P&C done with the broader school community, or even the broader community around the school, if any, to see what the community appetite is to go up?

Mr Merry: There has not been much conversation at all, if I was going to be brutally honest. Leading on from what Ms Coe said, I guess I wanted to also put on record the murky water that lies between the P&C, the school and the Education Directorate. Even in my dealings with Transport Canberra, it seems like they want to talk more to the school rather than to the P&C. And everything goes through them rather than us. So it is kind of murky. As a body of the school, do we answer directly to the principal or are we a separate “governing body”, for want of a better word?

Do we have a voice at the education department or is it the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations that is really our governing body? I think that needs to be recorded. That needs, I guess, some clarification. For someone that has only been involved for two years it seems like we put forward ideas to the principal, but it seems that he does not want to be seen as a potential complainant or someone that is whinging to the Education Directorate. So, where do we go in terms of the consultation? Effectively, if you read our constitution, just like my fellow colleagues here, we are the voice of the parents of the community. Therefore, where is our voice actually being sent to?

MR DAVIS: It sounds not dissimilar to the point that Ms Coe made regarding how you have direct conversations, if at all, with the directorate, or whether that happens through your school principal. Has anybody had any experience of the Education Directorate reaching out to have a conversation with you about anything, or have all your conversations with the Education Directorate been when they have reacted to

you making contact with them?

Ms Coe: Can I just add to that the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations are effectively our parent body in the ACT. They certainly come out to us on a lot on issues and feed that up to the directorate, but certainly in the Latham context we do not get any individual feedback to us. A lot of the statements that seem to come back to the parents' council are just very broad and very non-committal.

MR DAVIS: Sorry, I am taking some liberties, Chair, but I will finish up here; I just want to see if there is a consensus. Would it be fairer to say that the Council of Parents and Citizens Associations—the big group to which you report—is doing the very best that they can but a better situation would be where the P&Cs of individual schools could have ongoing conversations with the directorate for specific situations at your school—that that this feeding into the council, which the council feeds into the directorate, is not quite working? Would anyone dispute that?

Ms Coe: I think it is good for raising systemic issues because they can provide that oversight, but in terms of solving individual issues for us, no.

Mrs Edwards: As an example, capacity is a problem at our school but there are schools in Tuggeranong that have empty classes. So capacity is a problem, but the other way—not over-capacity, but under. I think it is very difficult for the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations to advocate for that full breadth in a detailed way. So I certainly support that comment that for systemic issues it is a very useful forum, but I do not think that on individual schools' issues it is a replacement for engaging directly with the school community.

MR CAIN: I have a supplementary question on what Mr Davis has raised. This might sound like I am asking exactly the same question, but have you or your P&Cs actually written to the department expressing, “Here are our concerns; can we have a conversation?”

Mr Merry: Not that I am aware of; I cannot deny or confirm that.

MR CAIN: Right.

Mrs Edwards: Majura P&C has engaged directly with the directorate. In 2020, when we realised that there were four classrooms that would not be able to be housed within the current school, the school board and the P&C together, in consultation with the principal, wrote to the minister and the Chief Minister—so, not directly to the directorate but to the minister. And subsequent to us putting in our submission, we have also been working quite closely with other inner north P&Cs. So we have had some engagement with the Education Directorate directly at an Inner North P&C level. We had a group of inner north P&Cs that got a briefing from the directorate on the capacity and infrastructure issues the inner north is facing, and some potential solutions. Then the offer was made by the directorate to have individual one-on-ones and we have just recently had that. But all of that is subsequent to us putting in our submission to this inquiry.

MR CAIN: I see. It is interesting that you have done that, and it seems that the offer

to engage has been accepted, at this stage, and you are just seeing where that goes?

Mrs Edwards: Yes, that is correct. I think it can be difficult sometimes for the directorate to let us know what they know because they are beholden to government announcements and things like that. So, beyond us knowing that the directorate understand that Majura has a problem with capacity, we were quite heartened when we had that conversation that we did not have to have an argument that there was a problem; we were having a discussion about what the solutions were. That was pleasing for us, but we still have no clear sense of what the solutions are, and we will continue to engage while we work it through.

MR CAIN: It sounds as if that option is available, and it may actually lead to some genuine consultation. I am not sure if I can make a recommendation, but I wonder if the P&C parent body has thought of advising all of its P&Cs, “By the way, if you have local issues you can contact the department directly.” I do not know whether you are willing to present yourself as an example of trying that, which actually seemed to produce the outcome you are looking for, even though you are still waiting for the solutions.

Mrs Edwards: Yes. I think one of the challenges is that the P&Cs are run by volunteers who do full-time things, including raise their children, but then work full-time. So, putting the burden always on the P&C to engage with the directorate, I think, is the wrong way to go. I think that the burden should be put on the directorate to actively engage with the community. I am not saying that communities do not have an obligation to raise concerns with the directorate, but if the directorate has information that is worth sharing with the community, I think that that is worth them doing. It should be two ways. It should not only be up to school communities to go and seek feedback.

I recognise that the directorate would not be able to forecast or foresee every single issue that every single school is going to raise, but on things like capacity in our area—knowing that we have had the NSET experience then the demountables experience—there are things that would have been worth coming out to the community to say, “We know that you have got a problem and we are working on it.” I think that would have alleviated a lot of the concern that we feel in our community, rather than putting it on the P&C to have had to go and advocate.

MR CAIN: I am glad that you did do what you did. This is a general governance issue perhaps, as well. Sometimes in waiting to hear something come from a department or a minister, obviously you have the option of starting the conversation yourself. So it does sound as if you can have a direct conversation if P&Cs are willing to do that. I have of a couple of little substantives questions, if that is okay. Firstly, thank you all for your very thorough submissions. I felt very disheartened for you at the time I was reading of your issues. I did note—I think it was in the Harrison and the Majura report—that you make reference to a census of ACT schools in 2018. Basically, you highlighted that your supposed capacity had risen miraculously without any extra infrastructure. Who ran that census?

Mrs Edwards: So, the census of ACT schools is an Education Directorate public document.

MR CAIN: From the directorate, yes.

Mrs Edwards: So the graph in terms of enrolments was sourced from there. In 2018 there was some media reporting about a consultant doing a review of the Common Ground redevelopment in Dickson, and that consultant report recommended the construction of an additional primary school in the inner north and permanent expansion of school capacity at high school level. So, if you are talking about the 2018 consultant's report, we got that information based on public reporting. Of course, I have not actually seen that consultant's report, but based on what we read in the media, that is where we got that from.

MR CAIN: But it seems that the capacity in 2018 was recorded as 756 and then two years later it was 806, and you say that there is no clear explanation as to how that could happen.

Mrs Edwards: Yes. You are talking about the expansion of capacity by an additional 50 students.

MR CAIN: Yes.

Mrs Edwards: It was a recalculation of our school's capacity which added 50 additional numbers to our capacity number but without any infrastructure. That is pre the transportables being installed.

MR CAIN: Was that miraculous extra capacity explained to you?

Mrs Edwards: No.

MR CAIN: Apart from accountants?

Mrs Edwards: No. I actually only found that out when I was researching the submission.

Ms Coe: Could I just jump in on that, because we know a little bit about that at Latham in terms of our assessed capacity. Our understanding of the way that it is assessed is that every space that could possibly be used for teaching is included in that, and there is a square metreage per student and teacher that is included. One of our big concerns with that sort of calculation is that, at least from what we can see, it does not take into account the needs of students with disability. So, if you are taking into account the space that a child with a wheelchair, particularly a power wheelchair, might need, it is going to be significantly more than what other students need. This averaging-out of space does not take that into account.

It also does not take into account the sensory needs of students with autism. Cramming more and more children into classrooms where the noise levels sometimes, I feel, exceed safe levels is not sustainable. It is not creating a learning environment where children can cope. I think that is why, particularly across the directorate, you are seeing this massive fleeing of students with disability to learning support units and massive demand for those places, because children cannot be in classrooms.

MR CAIN: In your Latham submission, amongst many things, you mentioned wheelchair accessibility. So, how many students—

Ms Coe: There is my daughter, as well as another child, and they both use wheelchairs and walking frames. There is also a staff member who has a disability. Could I just note that the Education Directorate and Latham Primary were aware that a wheelchair-using child was going to be attending the school since 2017, when he was in preschool. He was at another preschool but his parents met with the school and said, “We intend to come here,” and 4½ years later we still do not have front doors that they can get through.

My daughter took skin off her knuckles late last term. I got a call from the school to say that she was in the sick bay with an ice pack on her hand because she was trying to go into her own classroom. I think they put in a wheelchair-accessible door out to the playground, but our question is: why do our students who have disabilities have to choose being able to play with their friends or get through the front door of the school? It is not a choice that anyone should have to make.

MR DAVIS: Can I just ask a quick yes-or-no supplementary question based on what you said, Mrs Edwards, that your school capacity had increased on paper by 50 kids without an explanation? Have the other schools here had any similar experiences to your on-paper capacity changing? I can see that the answer is yes. Mr Merry, what was the capacity previously and then what was it changed to, do you know?

Mr Merry: I think it increased from the last census by about 70 students.

MR DAVIS: And did you see any tangible difference in the infrastructure at your school site to justify that increased capacity?

Mr Merry: No.

MR DAVIS: Okay, thank you.

Mr Merry: We have children that enrol the day before school starts or on the day. As I said, we are a Defence Force family. I actually saw a father enrol his son at 2 o'clock the day before school started.

MR DAVIS: Has your P&C had a similar experience to that of Mrs Edwards' P&C—that you have not received an explanation for how your on-paper capacity has changed?

Mr Merry: Yes, absolutely. And as Mrs Edwards alluded to, as well, we do not receive these consultants reports or anything of that nature. We get told that it is happening. Even going back to the traffic issues, they had said to us that there was going to be a wholehearted consultative environment, and all we had was one meeting with one representative per school and the principals, and that was it. And that was what they deemed consultative.

MR DAVIS: Has anyone here asked their principals if their principals have received

an explanation from the directorate on the methodology that has seen your capacity change? Is this something that the principals have expected or are able to feed into their P&Cs from the directorate, that you are aware of?

Ms Coe: I think it was raised during a P&C meeting. We had a very general broad based discussion about it towards the end of the night, when we tend to get a bit chatty. We also have a couple of parents who also sit on P&Cs for other schools as well as ours—they have kids spread across preschools and our school—and, yes, we had a general discussion. Our principal is quite good. When she knows she cannot talk about a subject because it is potentially broaching things that she is not supposed to discuss with us without first getting permission from the directorate, she will just back off. But the general understanding that we got was that it is an assessment and there is a square metreage per student. Our understanding is that they go into every classroom to figure out what the square metreage is and they include things like halls, the library and all of the specialist teaching spaces. So, we have lost a specialist teaching space as well.

MR DAVIS: At your school, is your community hub counted as part of those numbers, do you know?

Ms Coe: We do not know. We are a little bit worried that it will be, because we are doing all of these upgrades to it and then it could be taken over as a teaching space. At the moment I do not think it could be, because it is outside of the school fencing and gates.

MR CAIN: It could be part of a new recalculation of your capacity though.

Ms Coe: It could be, yes. There are issues with it. It has some old asbestos. It used to have a sort of sink and food preparation area, and there is asbestos under that as well. The toilets in it were unusable for a number of weeks last year so all the students who were at the YMCA after-school care, had to get walked down by an adult which created problems for them because they have obviously got ratios that they need to maintain of staff to students. That was because Latham, being an older school, is surrounded by beautiful old gum trees which, unfortunately, have very invasive root systems. So our pipes are always getting clogged up.

THE CHAIR: To this point, how do space limitations or capacity issues at your school affect the learning experience of kids at your school?

Mrs Edwards: One thing is worth mentioning here in terms of the square metreage and the capacity calculations. There is another really interesting point, which is the recent enterprise agreement with teachers, which sets maximum teacher-to-student ratios. So, there is a different amount of children per teacher in lower grades than in higher grades. That is why we were making the point about making sure there are enough classes, rather than capacity as an overall number—because in kindergarten, I think it is one to 21 or one to 22, and in year 6 it is one to 30.

The notion of forecasting enrolments actually requires the directorate, the school principal and everyone to have a really nuanced understanding of where that enrolment pressure is coming. Obviously, we get an influx into kindergarten because

our preschool is not big enough to accommodate all of the kids who are in our area. So we get kids coming in at kindergarten level. But it's about keeping an eye on how that is trending and if enrolments are coming in at other years. You can have five classes perfectly full at 21 but if you get two more enrolments you are going to drop two classes over that limit. That then has an impact for the school. They can choose to keep the classes over the limit—but then they have to staff the classes differently—or they can make decisions to make sure the classes are all a little bit lower. So instead of splitting it five ways, you split it six ways, and then you have lower levels of students per class.

So, I think it is a really nuanced and difficult discussion and I feel for the directorate in terms of trying to keep on top of that because that adds a level of complexity that is not just, “This school can have 908 students,” but is about where those 908 students are. If they are all in kindergarten, you need way more classes than what you need at year 6. So it is about keeping an eye on that growth and that trend. What is concerning to us is that we have had a peak in enrolments in our lower years, so we are just waiting for that to flow through the whole school. We are watching this increased number come. Every year we have more. There are five year 2 classes; I think, five or six year 1 classes; and five or six kindergarten classes.

That sort of block is going to flow through, and, yes, they have an increased number of students that can fit in a room. So you might not have five or six year 6 classes, but you may need four rather than three. So that is what happens every year: we need an extra class. So, for us, it is not about having lots of kids squashed into a classroom so much; it is more about making sure there are enough classrooms to have the kids in the year cohorts in line with the agreement and the guideline. And then there is the issue of space for teachers, because the other problem is that when every useable space is being used to teach, where do teachers do lesson planning?

We cannot fit our whole school in the school hall. So, we have not had parents being able to go into school for school assemblies since COVID lockdown because of social distancing because they can barely fit the students, let alone have any parents. So, there is no engagement now through the school for parents to come to see assemblies or anything. I do not think they can even fit all of the staff properly in the staff room. There are 51 staff and a small staff room, which was accommodating a much smaller school only five or six years ago.

THE CHAIR: Yes. Would any other schools like to reflect on how capacity issues or space limitations affect the learning experience?

Ms Coe: I could jump in, particularly about the sensory things—for background, my daughter has a physical disability but also autism—and the space issues and having more and more children in a classroom. Latham utilises the team-teaching approach, so you have two classes in the one room. Forty students in each room. That is great because it means that when you have two teachers and possibly up to two LSAs in a classroom, you are able to divide those 40 students up into probably four groups of 10 or however you need to divide it. But the noise levels can get completely out of control and certainly in our year 5/6 cohort, I believe there are 70 or 80 students in a single room.

There is a quiet learning space off that room where very small groups of students can get cycled through—and that is what they do—but the noise levels are so loud that another member of the P&C was reflecting recently that their son had said to her, “Why is it that it is only the kids with autism who get headphones and the rest of us have to listen to it?” It is deafening in some of those rooms. I know that there is a lot to be said for, “You can tell the kids to be quiet,” but you cannot tell 40 kids to be silent all day. That certainly impacts on it and it also affects things like how the kids learn in terms of having enough desks.

Most of the classrooms at Latham do not have enough desks to accommodate all the students at once. That is just because if you put 40 desks in there you could not fit anything else in the rooms. There are kids learning out in the hallways, which are not necessarily always the warmest places to be because most of the doors at Latham just have massive gaps under them and it is freezing throughout the school. They also have leaks coming through the roof so you might be sitting next to a bucket. It is impacting on the kids. I was speaking to the performing arts teacher the other day and she was saying, “We are kind of limited. I would like to be able to teach the kids piano. We used to be able to get the keyboards out. We do not have a space where we can fit all the keyboards except for the hall, and the acoustics of teaching 20-odd students piano in the hall, particularly in the younger years, is not great.”

THE CHAIR: It depends on whether they are good at piano or not!

Ms Coe: Yes, I am going to go, “Not many”! At least it is not the recorder! So there are those impacts. In terms of space, from the disability perspective, setting up assistive technology can be difficult because it needs space. It is absolutely vital for kids to be able to learn and have access to that assistive technology. That is an impact, but it impacts your ability to use technology for learning more broadly in the classroom and to look at those really innovative ways of delivering teaching. Because where are you going to store it? It is great to be able to say, “Let’s go out and get all these awesome things for the classroom,” but there is no storage space. So you have to constantly make decisions about what you cut down on or get rid of.

THE CHAIR: Lucky last, Mr Merry. Do capacity issues or space limitations affect the learning experience at Harrison?

Mr Merry: Totally. In our submission we put forward that, as well, there has been no consistency. Children turn up to a classroom thinking that they are doing music in that classroom but they have been shifted at the last minute. My son has special needs. He is on the autism spectrum, as well. He is very rigid in his roster, and that throws him out. At the moment—I am just looking at our submission—we have English classes that are taking place in kitchen and food tech rooms. We have HASS in dedicated maths classrooms. We have PE theory in food prep classrooms. We have a music class on a Friday morning in the same room as our uniform shop. So the uniform shop has to finish early, pack up, and then you have music. That is very much, I guess, hindering a lot of our students in terms of their capacity to learn. When they are trying to find a classroom and sit down, they are wasting half of their lessons when they should be learning, rather than trying to find where their classroom is, particularly in the high school sector.

The school has apparently had conversations with capital works and infrastructure. They came up with the solution of converting our multi-purpose rooms, building walls and making classrooms. But it is robbing Peter to pay Paul. The concept is that we do not want those multi-purpose halls, which are used for assemblies and for PE classes, turned into classrooms. So, that has been quite limited in that sense. I do not think I mentioned it before, but we have students in three preschool classes which are connected to the school who need to go to Franklin because our preschool and kindergartens are currently in four demountables. I use that word “demountables” quite loosely, because they have been there since the school opened, I think, in 2008. The word “demountables” is probably redundant because—let’s face it—they are there for the time being.

But, yes, definitely we have had to find additional learning support rooms—two of them this year—due to the number of students requiring them. This has had a domino effect, and then we have had to convert one of the multi-purpose rooms, as I said, into a music room because of the learning support unit. There are more and more children with additional needs required learning support. So we are at capacity with that, too, and that needs further investigation.

MR DAVIS: Can I ask a quick question, Chair?

THE CHAIR: If it is a very quick one, because we are out of time.

MR CAIN: I have a very quick one too.

MR DAVIS: Just a quick one for everyone interested. We have heard some evidence in this committee about some demountables that are whiz-bang, fancier than some of our older school campuses, and then we have heard evidence of some demountables that are questionable, to say the least. Can I just get a read of the room? Is there a sort of ideological disposition against demountable classrooms more broadly or is it actually that the demountable classrooms that we have are just not creating the space required for learning? I would not mind anyone who has got a strong view, one way or the other, on demountables—for or against—elaborating a bit further.

Mr Rowley: At Majura Primary P&C we see demountables as just a short-term solution that are there to get us across the line. We do not see them as an answer to the infrastructure needs of our school being met. I think they are just there when you are caught off-guard. The problems for our school from a capacity perspective have been well known for a long period of time. So, yes, to help us out in the short-term, but that is not an answer to the problems that we have.

MR DAVIS: In the case of your school, Mr Merry, you have newer demountables. Are they, in your opinion, good spaces in which to teach and learn, or are they demountables in the sense that we first think of—of being a bit isolating?

Mr Merry: I had demountables when I went to school, many, many years ago. They were demountables that were, you know, almost dilapidated. These seem good quality, but I think there is an issue in regard to the heating and cooling. They are demountables; therefore you cannot have ducted air conditioning systems, et cetera. From a sporting background—because I am involved in some local sports—I know

there have been a lot of conversations about sporting groups going towards that whole demountable structure rather than a standard bricks-and-mortar clubhouse. I know there have been more and more conversations, and that it is a lot cheaper, per se, but I think heating and cooling is probably the biggest issue, particularly in Canberra where it is minus 2 one day and six months later it is 44 degrees.

Mrs Edwards: In older schools our demountables are beautiful in comparison. That is not to say that our classrooms are terrible but a 2021 demountable with everything that 2021 construction entails compares to a 1963 classroom. But you lose playground space, and they are not a long-term solution, because they do not resolve problems like toilet access, hall access, teaching space, and spaces for teachers to collaborate on lesson planning. They do not resolve the other issues; they just provide classes.

THE CHAIR: We will let Ms Coe weigh in on this one and then we need to call it.

Ms Coe: A lot of demountables are not wheelchair accessible. We cannot get the front of our school made wheelchair accessible. There is a ramp, yes, but the doors certainly are not wheelchair accessible. And I know from previous experience at another school that the directorate is not going to spend thousands of dollars building ramps to demountables that are old and dilapidated because they suddenly go, “We haven’t got wheelchair access at this part of the school.” And that just seems like a waste of money because that demountable will need to be replaced eventually, and you have built a shiny new ramp up to a demountable that is just going to be torn down.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank each and every one of you for being here today—Latham Primary Parents and Community Association, Harrison School Parents and Community Association and Majura Primary School Parents and Citizens Association. The secretary will provide you with a copy of the proof transcript of today’s hearing when it is available to check for accuracy. If you have taken any questions on notice today, could you please liaise with the committee secretary to provide those answers. The committee’s hearing for today is now adjourned. Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 2.21 pm.