

1 May 2024

Andrew Barr, Chief Minister and Treasurer
CMTEDD, ACT Government

CC:

Yvette Berry, Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Minister for Early Childhood Development
Chris Steel, Minister for Skills and Training

Dear Chief Minister Barr,

We write to ask you to commit to the next generation of Canberrans.

The ACT Government has always affirmed its commitment to education. We are the most progressive jurisdiction in Australia and this is reflected in our public school and vocational education systems.

For too long we have been complacent about our relatively high performance, and our relatively well-funded system. While other states and territories struggle to reach minimum funding levels, it may seem that we have nothing to improve in the ACT. This is not the case. School funding was devised to get 80% of our students to the national minimum standard, but our community expects schools to far exceed this. CIT, too, must fight for every dollar that goes towards its students.

AEU members nurture the next generation of Canberrans. They are the essential workers on the frontline who serve every family. Our members work far beyond their paid hours of work because they care. We want them to know that the ACT Government cares, too.

We ask the ACT Government to make 2024-25 the year of education. No longer can we be complacent in our relatively good position. Every public education student in the ACT deserves better than good: they deserve great.

This submission comes at the conclusion of two vital inquiries into education in the ACT: one into school infrastructure, and one into the teaching of literacy and numeracy. We urge the Government to grasp this juncture for the opportunity it is. Now is the time for a concerted investment into public education.

Our recommendations emphasise the need for our education system to act like a *system*. We must invest in our built environments, in our digital infrastructure, in the ways systems support learning and teaching. There is no excuse for every educator to reinvent the wheel every day at work. There is no reason for every school principal to design and manage complex business processes without any guidance. When education systems respect, support, and uplift educators, students benefit. The whole community benefits.

We hope to discuss our recommendations further with the Government in the coming months.

Regards,



Angela Burroughs
Branch President



Patrick Judge
Branch Secretary

Our ACT public schools and CIT need:

- investment in **literacy and numeracy**
- urgent **infrastructure** repair, maintenance, and upgrades
- minimum **staffing** levels for quality and safety



Teachers and principals want investment in literacy and numeracy

We need system cohesion and support to schools

Literacy and numeracy are the foundational skills on which all other learning depends. Additional funding is needed to establish curriculum support and provide ready-to-use materials. Students falling behind need extra help in the form of small group intensive learning, and students experiencing mental health or learning difficulties need access to a dedicated school psychologist. Our fee-free TAFE program needs investment in student capacity building – until then, CIT staff will shoulder an impossible burden to get their students through their studies.



We must fix our schools and CIT campuses

Prioritise urgent repair, upgrade and maintenance to schools and CIT – including their digital infrastructure

We must prioritise equity and excellence in school infrastructure, as a matter of urgency. Many schools in our public system are in dire need of upgrade and repair. Aging CIT campuses at Bruce and Fyshwick are in urgent need of upgrade and repair.



Education can't happen without a teacher in the classroom

Properly staff our public schools, rebuild our CIT teacher workforce

Two years on from the Teacher Shortage Taskforce report, ACT public schools remain chronically understaffed. Additional investment is needed to bring creative and innovative solutions to staffing our public schools and CIT.

Better support for schools to teach literacy and numeracy

The ACT Government has a once in a generation opportunity to invest in the future of education. We call upon the Government to address equity gaps and achieve ongoing improvement in literacy and numeracy outcomes across the ACT public education system. ACT's public schools are high performing, yet in recent years inequities in our system have been exposed. The bipartisan support for the review of literacy and numeracy in ACT public schools reveals the passion and commitment of those on all sides of the ACT Legislative Assembly to see ACT public schools excel in their pursuit of excellence and equity. Having established an Expert Panel to review literacy and numeracy in ACT public schools, it is incumbent on the government to fully resource the Panel's recommendations.

The AEU understands that a desire for greater consistency and an urgent need for system support with curriculum resources, assessment and reporting have emerged as recurring themes from the Panel's inquiries. This is consistent with the views put forward by our members. The ACT public school system is bigger, more complex and facing staffing challenges on a scale not before experienced. These unprecedented challenges and an appetite for greater system support have created the perfect environment for properly implemented and resourced system reform in teaching and learning, in assessment and in providing targeted support to students who need it most. Current and future generations of ACT public school students deserve nothing less. Teachers and school leaders will be the beneficiaries of system support that removes unnecessary and time-consuming duplication. In a supportive system with greater consistency, teachers and school leaders will be better able to focus on what they do best: teach and support student learning.

Our teachers need curriculum materials to hit the ground running

Compared with other jurisdictions, the ACT Education Directorate offers relatively thin support to its schools regarding support in developing and implementing curricula.

Teachers and school leaders fill the gaps themselves. Our members report either designing their teaching materials from scratch or purchasing materials from external sources. Most of the teachers that the AEU office has spoken to have paid, or currently pay, for resources to use in the classroom. This particularly affects early career teachers.

Our survey of ACT public school teachers found that 88% pay for teaching resources out of their own pocket. On average, our ACT teachers report spending \$744 a year on school resources. Extrapolating these figures, we can estimate that in 2023 teachers in ACT public schools spent \$2.58 million of their own money on classroom resources.¹

It is plainly unacceptable that ACT public servants are having to pay out of their own pocket for resources to do their job.

We are also aware that many schools subscribe to resource services and pay for materials out of their school budget. While this does ameliorate the issue of individual employees spending their own money, it is far from ideal: the Education Directorate is thus spending some considerable amount on outsourcing the production of curriculum materials to for-profit companies, with little oversight on procurement. Given the way that financial management of the schooling system has been almost entirely devolved to schools, we would expect that the

¹ The 2022-23 Annual Report counts 3,948 teachers. If 88% of these spent \$744 in 2023 on average, we arrive at \$2,584,656. Survey data is taken from the AEU State of Our Schools survey.

Education Directorate cannot say with any certainty how much it spends on these services, or how many services it pays for. It is thus impossible to say whether the investment represents good value for money or track the efficacy of each purchase.

We recommend additional funding to education to fund the recommendations we made to the [Literacy and Numeracy Inquiry](#).² These include the establishment of a centralised curriculum support unit in the Education Support Office. This unit would provide a user-friendly repository of curriculum materials, and a curated list of quality-assured programs that schools can access and that are centrally resourced.

Small group tutoring works – we can't afford not to provide it

The Education Directorate endorses a model of intensive learning called Multi-Tiered System of Supports, where students who have extra learning needs receive intensive tutoring in small groups, targeted to their learning needs. There is considerable evidence that this approach helps struggling students to catch up to their peers. It also reduces teacher workload, as over time if all students are supported to meet minimum outcomes, a classroom teacher need not differentiate lessons to a vast spectrum of ability.

This model of targeted small group tutoring is difficult to implement in the context of a severe teacher shortage. Many schools find it impossible to maintain normal educational program delivery as teacher shortages become acute. When it is a challenge to staff classrooms with a teacher as usual, it is not reasonable to expect schools to have capacity to spare a teacher to run intensive one-on-one or small group support.

This is where a funded program of targeted and sustained development of our School Assistant workforce could give small group tutoring the boost it needs. This might look like:

- Working with CIT to offer scholarships to School Assistants to undertake a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care or Certificate IV in School Based Education Support with paid study time³
- Developing a new local designation in the School Assistant Classification Framework that identifies experience and expertise in small group tutoring, with accompanying career progression pathways
- Moving towards centrally recruiting and deploying school assistants in processes that align with teacher mobility, to help schools get the help they need and assist with compliance regarding job security under the *Fair Work Act*.

These are steps that would align with the commitments already made by the Government in the Enterprise Agreement covering school assistants. The Government committed to develop and implement a framework for the central engagement, transfer and placement of School Assistants.⁴

Additionally, the Education Directorate has also agreed to conduct a review in conjunction with the AEU and other relevant unions into the School Assistant Classification Standards

² Australian Education Union ACT Branch, “Reaching for More: System Support in ACT Public Schools.”

³ This is a very cost effective way to uplift the capacity of our workforce. CIT charges \$2,162 for a Cert IV in School Based Education Support.

⁴ “ACT Public Sector Administrative and Related Classifications Enterprise Agreement 2023-2026,” clause R18.1.

Framework that focuses on the classification of School Assistants and their role scope. This is amid recognition nationally that the work of School Assistants is increasingly complex, as evidenced by the proposed upgrade in skill level in the ANZSCO review.⁵ This change proposed by the ABS recognises that School Assistant work requires a skill level commensurate with a Certificate IV qualification, or a Certificate III with at least two years of on-the-job training.

This proposal connects an urgent need with a growing workforce ready for capacity development.

We recommend that a development program for School Assistants and dedicated resources in the Education Directorate be funded to improve School Assistant job security and career pathways, to ensure we retain the people we invest in.

We must provide every school with a psychologist

Our school psychologist members have long campaigned for adequate staffing to meet the demands of our students. School psychologists are crucial in helping schools meet the needs of all students, including those with mental health concerns, learning difficulties, and disability. Too often, our schools have no or very limited access to school psychologists.

We recommend that the ACT Government takes action through the 2024-25 Budget to ensure every public school has at minimum one full-time school psychologist. Given workforce shortages in psychology, this will necessitate introducing attraction and retention incentives to make working with the Education Directorate as attractive as working in private psychological practice.

Provide the intensive support our CIT students need

The ACT Government has made investments into addressing skills shortages by entering into [a \\$16.5 million Skills Agreement](#) with the Australian Government that delivered 2,530 fee free TAFE enrolments at CIT in 2023. The ACT Government's extension to the program will deliver 3,600 fee-free places between 2024 and 2026. This is a significant cohort of students.

People accessing free or low fee training are likely to be people who live with disadvantage, both socioeconomically and as learners. This was acknowledged through the 2022 Jobs and Skills Summit and associated discussions. This means that people accessing training sometimes need extra support to meet the demands of their course across the foundation skills of language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills (LLND). It also means that they sometimes are studying while in insecure housing, or while needing help to access transport, childcare, food, and to meet other costs of living and study.⁶ These forms of support are delivered by counsellors, social workers and disability support services at CIT, as well as by the CIT Students Association, CITSA. CIT's own student services require direct investment – CIT knows its students, and its students should not need to look externally for help.

While CIT provides this wide range of support to its students, its baseline funding to do so was not increased when either the JobTrainer or fee-free TAFE programs were announced. This has led to a situation where students have their tuition costs waived, but the costs to CIT to support

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Consultation Round 1: ANZSCO [Preliminary] Proposed Changes."

⁶ Fee-free TAFE is helping priority learning groups access vocational education. CIT reports that this program is helping to reach First Nations students, young people, job seekers, unpaid carers, people with disability, women in financial hardship, humanitarian visa holders and veterans. Canberra Institute of Technology, "CIT Annual Report," 33.

their learning have increased. Without additional funding, CIT teachers are left to carry the burden of providing ad hoc support on top of their already stressful workloads.

We recommend that a package to enhance and expand the LLND, inclusion and social supports that CIT offers its students be introduced for the duration of the Fee Free TAFE and JobTrainer programs. This will help those CIT students to thrive, which in turn helps Canberra meet critical skills shortages.

Prioritise urgent upgrades to public school infrastructure

If you are a student who lives close to one of the newer schools in our system, you enjoy clean and well maintained facilities. However, if you are a student in an aging school that has not enjoyed renovation in decades, the situation can be bleak. Submissions to recent Legislative Assembly inquiries into school infrastructure noted, for example, toilet blocks that need demolishing due to deeply embedded urine odour. AEU members go to work every day to experience unsanitary conditions, unworkable extreme temperatures, mould and rot, exposed electrical wires, and pest faeces.

This is not acceptable in 2024 in the ACT. Every student deserves a school that is safe, comfortable, clean and fit-for-purpose. We must do better.

The AEU made a [detailed submission](#) to the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion's Inquiry into the Future of School Infrastructure in the ACT. We began work on this submission with our members in 2022, and we are pleased to see the committee's report has adopted all of our recommendations in some way. While we wait for the government's response to this Inquiry, students have progressed through schools that are unsafe, unclean, and uncomfortable.

In the meantime, we have also participated in local and national inquiries into the impacts of menstruation and menopause on workers. We have been told repeatedly by our members in schools that the hardest part of managing symptoms associated with menstruation and menopause in comfort, privacy and dignity is often the provision of basic toileting facilities.

It should go without saying that no employee of the ACT Government should be subjected to conditions where they do not have access to appropriate toilets. This is now enshrined under the *Period Products and Facilities (Access) Act 2023* (ACT) (s20) but is not yet seen in practice in every school.

Disparity becomes even more stark if we compare aging public school infrastructure with the facilities enjoyed by private schools in the ACT. Much of the ACT's private school infrastructure is publicly funded. An AEU report found that:⁷

- Government spending on ACT private school capital investment is 125% that of ACT public schools over the decade from 2012 to 2021,
- The ACT taxpayer has spent more on private school infrastructure than public school infrastructure every year since 2012,
- The average annual capital investment per student through this decade was \$1,540 for public school students, and \$2,043 for private school students, and
- One private school in the ACT has received an average of \$8,580 per student per year for the past four years from a Commonwealth-funded program designed to improve school

⁷ Australian Education Union, "Ending the Capital Funding Divide in Australian Schools".

infrastructure “particularly for the most educationally disadvantaged students.” The school in question has only 1% of their student cohort from the bottom quarter of socio-educational advantage.

Our education system stands for excellence and equity. If we are serious about this, we must urgently prioritise upgrading the infrastructure of our ACT public schools. Other problems in education cannot be solved urgently, due to the teacher shortage. Infrastructure improvements can occur now.

We recommend that the 2024-25 ACT Budget commits to getting *all* our schools up to a basic minimum standard. We recommend an injection of funding to meet each of the following goals, as detailed in our submission to the Future of School Infrastructure inquiry:

- **Prioritise equity across the public school system:** Establish comprehensive minimum standards for all school sites, audit all school infrastructure against these standards, and set out a schedule for improvement until all sites reach minimum standards. Report on progress against these standards in annual reports. Increase ACT budget allocation for Education in line with necessary improvements identified through this process. The audit work and identified necessary upgrades should not be the responsibility of school principals, but of a dedicated team in the Education Directorate.
- **Improve planning and maintenance systems:** Reform budget processes within the Education Directorate so that all repairs, maintenance, upgrades and new builds are funded centrally and undertaken by a centralised building services unit. Provide transparency of decision-making regarding how works are prioritised. Centralise building services to allow school principals to be educational leaders rather than asset and budget managers. Ensure systemwide reforms have system-wide resourcing for infrastructure implications. Review processes for major works to ensure equity and lower school leader workload.
- **Commit to inclusion of all students:** Commit to fully funding infrastructure upgrades deemed necessary by the 2023 Inclusive Education Strategy. Adapt universal design standards from other jurisdictions to complement ACT schools minimum standards. Use this to set a schedule of upgrades so that every school site has capacity for inclusion. Reset budgetary approaches to ensure that schools are fully funded to perform all necessary upgrades.
- **Ensure safety for teachers, principals, school assistants and students:** Immediately and centrally fund infrastructure works to reduce violence risk both preventatively and when an Occupational Violence Risk Assessment identifies an environmental control to reduce risk. Develop long term air quality plans. Improve essential facilities like toilets. Ensure safe temperatures in classrooms. Provide adequate staff accommodations.
- **Resolve capacity issues:** Develop a school capacity calculation formula that more accurately represents usage of schools. Respond to existing crowding issues accordingly.

Digital infrastructure is vital to ensure our systems support learning

The 2022 Teacher Shortage Taskforce not only uncovered the extent of the teacher shortage in the ACT, but also the limitations of ACT Education Directorate human resource management and information systems. Basic employment information is not available centrally resulting in hours of data inputting by school leaders to construct staffing profiles and provide evidence of

acute staffing pressures. Principal members note that recruitment processes are not fit for purpose and push unnecessary workload to school leaders. They note the extreme inefficiencies with the annual transfer round that ties up hundreds of hours of school leader time in a manual process.

Interoperability between platforms is a crucial element of a digital infrastructure that supports learning. At present, teachers and school leaders must use several systems every day to access and enter data essential to their work. For example, a negative incident involving a student requires duplicate reports: one to report the workplace safety concern, and one to report the student's actions or situation. The two systems are completely separate. This not only creates unnecessary reporting work on behalf of a (possibly injured) worker, but also means that data-driven insights on important issues like work safety cannot easily be extracted by school or Education Directorate leaders.

We also still need basic investment in ICT hardware. AEU members have long advocated for ICT hardware to meet teaching and learning needs. This includes reliable internet access at all ACT public schools, functioning interactive whiteboards and adequate supplies of computers so that every staff member (by head count not FTE) has access to the basic tools required to perform an educator's work.

We recommend that the 2024-25 ACT Budget commits to an injection of funding to improve digital infrastructure with the following actions:

- Review ICT procurement practices to ensure that these establish and monitor end-user operational requirements and evaluate ICT provision against these requirements. Conduct a performance audit of systems supporting schools. Ensure information management systems enhance learning and do not increase workload. Provide hardware that meets basic teaching and learning needs. Provide adequate technical support. Provide adequate consultation for changes and training when changes are made.

Prioritise urgent upgrades to CIT infrastructure

We make recommendations in relation CIT infrastructure funding to address the dire need to maintain and upgrade aging campus facilities.

While we look forward to the new CIT Woden campus welcoming students next year, there are another four CIT campuses that serve our VET student community, and AEU members at these campuses tell us that their working and teaching facilities are inadequately maintained. In particular, the CIT campuses in Bruce and Fyshwick are in urgent need of repair. These campuses teach essential skills vital to Canberra's wellbeing and economy: nursing, aged and disability care, mental health, plumbing, electrical and automotive trades, metal fabrication, childhood education and care, community services and youth work, and so on. Students in these subject areas learn in facilities and with equipment that are older and in need of updating and improved maintenance.

Growth in TAFE enrolments related to fee-free TAFE is also placing pressure on the capacity of existing facilities. People seeking to improve their skills (and employability) should not have to be turned away because CIT facilities cannot accommodate additional enrolments, especially when we are in the midst of a local and national skills shortage.

Recent inquiries into public school infrastructure made clear that best practice aligns asset management with organisational strategic priorities. As CIT focuses on its next era of vocational education, it is crucial that the quality of teaching facilities match the quality its educators put into their work every day.

We recommend that the 2024-25 ACT Budget provides an increase in CIT’s funding for campus renewal, to upgrade facilities in its Bruce and Fyshwick campuses. Every CIT student and teacher should have comfortable, clean, modern and safe facilities for learning and working.

Properly staff our public schools

The ACT Teacher Shortage Taskforce found that we are currently enduring an unprecedented and acute teacher shortage in ACT public schools.⁸

The most immediate impact of reduced staffing is ‘collapsed’, ‘split’ or ‘combined’ classes, where the policy that limits class sizes is temporarily breached to cope with the school having too few staff. This is a strategy authorised by the Education Directorate in its Daily Staffing Availability Model. It is done in an ad hoc way to mitigate slightly reduced staffing, or in manner that is ‘routine, regular, or pre-planned’ to cope with significantly reduced staffing. Other actions that are authorised by the Education Directorate include the cancellation or postponement of explicit learning programs while ‘supervision’ takes place instead.

The AEU regularly receives reports of teachers having to accept extra students to their class almost every day or having to supervise very large groups of students. This severely diminishes a teacher’s capacity to deliver lessons that effectively meet the learning outcomes of the Australian Curriculum.

These consequences are not meaningfully represented in any data that the Education Directorate collects. While it can see system-level staffing shortages via HR systems, it cannot see the classroom level impact of missed lessons, extra planning, disrupted students and overworked teachers. Because of this, it is imperative to listen to teachers when we state the gravity of the teacher shortage.

There is plenty more that we could do to recruit and retain teachers. The Teacher Shortage Taskforce’s recommendations were accepted by the Minister, but some are still awaiting implementation from the Education Directorate. The AEU brought several initiatives to enterprise bargaining that were not accepted by the Government, including workload reduction measures and improvements to policies around staff health and safety. Other states have attraction and retention incentives – often up to tens of thousands of dollars – to get teachers in their classrooms, and the ACT is not competing with these.

We recommend that the 2024-25 ACT Budget include targeted funding to end the teacher shortage crisis, with attraction and retention incentives to alleviate staffing pressures at our most acutely understaffed schools.

Rebuild our CIT teacher workforce

There is a national shortage of teachers in vocational education. This is caused by the fact that VET educator salaries have not kept pace with trades, which is a disincentive for workers in

⁸ Education Directorate, ACT Government, “Teacher Shortage Taskforce: Final Report.”

industry to become and remain teachers in VET. CIT made major strides towards changing this with an increase to the CIT teacher salary structure, finally putting CIT teachers on a path to parity with school teachers. Our work is not done: we must continue to increase CIT teacher salary in future agreements, or else we risk a mass exodus from the TAFE teacher system.

Expert reviews on the best ways to attract VET educators from industry highlight the importance of targeted incentives in areas of need, the provision of flexible options towards training qualifications, and systematic orientations and support for new VET practitioners.⁹ All of these strategies are possible within the existing CIT Enterprise Agreement.

We recommend that the 2024-25 ACT Budget increases funding to CIT to introduce attraction and retention programs for teaching areas of greatest need, provide flexible options towards gaining training qualifications for industry experts interested in TAFE teaching, and the development of a New Educator Support Program for CIT teachers.

⁹ Tyler and Dymock, “Attracting Industry Experts to Become VET Practitioners,” 7.

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