

2026–27

# Budget Submission



# Introduction

ACT Parents is the peak body representing parents and carers of children in ACT public schools. We advocate for quality, inclusive, and accessible education and school communities, and support a network of volunteer-run Parents and Citizens (P&C) Associations across the Territory. Our work includes capacity building for P&Cs, advising government on system wide public-school issues, and amplifying the parent voice in public education policy.

ACT Parents welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the 2026–27 ACT Budget. This submission builds on ACT Parents' 2025–26 pre-budget priorities and is informed by our recent parent survey focused specifically on public school resourcing.

Parents are clear that many of the challenges facing ACT public schools are not the result of poor intent or lack of commitment by schools and staff, but of system-wide resourcing constraints. Parents consistently identify workforce shortages, inequities in educational opportunity, insufficient wellbeing and inclusion supports, and infrastructure investment that does not always align with need as the most pressing issues facing the system.

Most importantly, parents are unequivocal that the highest priority for public education is ensuring a qualified teacher is in front of every class, every day. Staffing shortages and inadequate access to relief teachers are resulting in frequent split or collapsed classes, which parents report are often supervision-only arrangements rather than meaningful learning experiences.

ACT Parents' priorities align strongly with the ACT Wellbeing Framework, recognising that schools are foundational settings where children and families experience and develop wellbeing across multiple domains. Investment in public education delivers long-term benefits for students, families, communities and the Territory as a whole.

ACT Parents therefore calls on the ACT Government to prioritise investment across five key areas, led by staffing and workforce capacity:

1. Workforce capacity and staffing
2. An equitable public school system
3. Needs-based infrastructure investment
4. Inclusion and student wellbeing
5. Parent engagement and support for P&C Associations

Together, these priorities reflect parent feedback that targeted, needs-based investment would significantly improve equity, safety, wellbeing and educational outcomes for students across ACT public schools.

# 1. Workforce Capacity and Staffing

## Issue

Having a qualified teacher in front of the class every day should be the highest priority for ACT public schools. That is what parents told ACT Parents in response to our survey about school resourcing. 97.8% of respondents believe having a qualified teacher in front of the class every day is a must-have, making workforce capacity the most important resourcing issue raised.

Workforce capacity extends beyond classroom teachers alone. Schools rely on a broader team, including Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), specialist teachers and allied health professionals to ensure that every student can participate meaningfully in learning.

Parents report that shortages of teachers and relief staff are leading to frequent use of split or collapsed classes. Split classes are often effectively supervision-only arrangements rather than meaningful learning experiences, disrupting continuity of learning and undermining educational quality.

At the same time, insufficient access to LSAs and specialist support staff limits the ability of teachers to meet diverse learning needs within the classroom. Parents emphasise that LSAs play a critical role in supporting students with disability, neurodivergence and additional learning needs, and that inconsistent or inadequate LSA allocation places pressure on both students and teachers.

Workforce pressures also extend to allied health and wellbeing professionals. Limited access to school psychologists, speech pathologists and occupational therapists contributes to delays in assessment and intervention, increasing classroom complexity and impacting overall school functioning.

Parents also emphasised the importance of teachers being appropriately qualified in the subjects they teach. This includes ensuring that secondary students are taught by teachers with subject-specific expertise, and that specialist subjects such as languages are delivered by qualified language teachers. When schools are unable to recruit or retain qualified specialist teachers, programs may be reduced, delivered

inconsistently, or taught outside teachers' areas of expertise, affecting both learning quality and student engagement.

Ensuring a qualified teacher is present in every classroom every day therefore requires adequate baseline staffing allocations, sufficient access to relief teachers, appropriate LSA support and expanded specialist workforce capacity, so that absences, complex needs and wellbeing challenges do not routinely undermine learning.

## Parent Voice

*"One of my children's classes has been split to others consistently (at least 1 day a week)."*

*"There have been several occasions where my child's class was split due to unexpected teacher vacancies. LSAs have not been readily available and access to the contracted youth worker was suspended. For most of the year, Friday afternoons were part of the flexible timetabling."*

*"The school has so many students with high needs, including my own child. They try their best but do not have enough resources or staff."*

*"My daughter in yr8 did not have a maths specialist teacher for her class the entire year. None of the classes in this year group had a maths teacher, they had to ask the maths coordinator to run a lecture style maths lesson for the year group, which only occurred once a week. No feedback (other than final reports) was provided to yr8 students on their learning in maths. It has been a significant source of stress for students and parents."*

*"My Son is often split, and there have been issues with teacher absences. We lost our language program years ago and it was never replaced. Specialised art became less frequent."*

*"My kids are often split into other classes. The school has not been able to teach a language or music (to some students) due to teacher shortages. The school psychologist is very overworked and almost impossible to get assistance from."*

*"Regular Split or collapsed classes across both the primary and secondary schools my kids attend. In secondary school this has led to students not being taught everything they were later tested on."*

## Recommendations

- 1.1** Ensure that funding for Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) is maintained to ensure consistent and needs-based allocation of support for students with disability, neurodivergence and additional learning needs.
- 1.2** Develop strategies to increase access to relief teachers to minimise the use of split or collapsed classes.
- 1.3** Strengthen recruitment and retention strategies for subject-qualified and specialist teachers, including languages and other curriculum areas where shortages affect program quality and consistency.
- 1.4** Ensure transparent workforce planning on staffing allocations, specialist teacher coverage and allied health access across ACT public schools.

## 2. Equity of Opportunity

### Issue

While ACT public schools operate on the principle that every child has a right to education and a place in their local public school, ACT Parents is concerned that this right does not always translate into equitable educational opportunities across the system. Parents report that students' opportunities within the system vary significantly depending on where they live. Uneven access to specialist programs, including music, language education, and other academic, sporting and cultural offerings is creating inequitable educational experiences across the ACT.

Schools in some areas of the ACT offer a multitude of programs and opportunities for students, whereas others, usually in areas of greater disadvantage are unable to provide students the same offerings. This creates an environment where parents look elsewhere, including out of area public schools or independent schools, to give their children the educational opportunities they value. This results in some schools becoming residual in nature. In order to reverse this trend it is important that investment is made on a system wide level to ensure that there is greater equity of opportunity across the system.

One parent raised concerns that current resourcing arrangements reinforce socioeconomic disadvantage rather than reduce it. They noted that schools in lower-SES areas often struggle to recruit staff and offer specialist programs such as languages, music and the arts, while higher-SES schools are able to provide a wider

range of opportunities. In their view, this uneven distribution of resources creates enrolment “pull factors”, contributes to demographic concentration, and ties access to high-quality public education to postcode and housing affordability, rather than need.

This lack of equity of opportunity is contributing to families leaving the public system in search of broader educational offerings. ACT Parents call for a public education system that delivers equity of opportunity, not just equity of access.

## Parent Voice

*“It’s a joke to say that public education is free when being able to pay \$500,000 more for a house means you get a far superior education for your kids...I could send my kid to a private school for a lot less money, than the extra it would cost to buy a house in a “Category A’ high school zone!”*

*“Why do some public high schools have excellent teaching spaces and resources and others have very little.”*

*“While the main subjects are well taught at our school there seem to be vast differences between public schools on the opportunities accessible beyond the basics - music, sport, languages, etc.”*

## Recommendations

**2.1** Develop and resource a system-wide approach to equitable access to specialist programs, including music, language education and other academic, sporting and cultural programs, regardless of postcode.

**2.2** Increase recurrent funding to schools based on student and community need, with an explicit focus on expanding educational opportunities in under-served areas.

## 3. Needs-Based Infrastructure Investment

### Issue

Safe, functional and well-maintained school infrastructure is fundamental to learning, wellbeing and equity. Parents report that routine and preventative maintenance across many ACT public schools requires significant improvement. Issues such as leaking roofs, ageing heating and cooling systems, deteriorating classrooms, and substandard or poorly maintained bathroom facilities undermine student wellbeing and disrupt learning.

Parents are particularly concerned that essential maintenance is sometimes deferred, resulting in avoidable deterioration and higher long-term costs. Basic infrastructure, including clean, functional and accessible bathrooms, should be considered a minimum standard across all ACT public schools.

There are also noticeable differences in facilities between older and newer schools. While new schools are often designed to contemporary educational standards with flexible learning spaces, modern amenities and accessibility features, many older schools have not received equivalent renewal or upgrades.

ACT Parents calls for a transparent, structured program of renewal and modernisation to ensure older schools are progressively upgraded to meet contemporary standards for teaching, learning, accessibility and student wellbeing. In addition, maintenance backlogs, such as leaky roofs, substandard toilet facilities and heating and cooling systems should be prioritised.

Parents support a transparent, needs-based approach to infrastructure investment that prioritises routine maintenance, renewal of ageing facilities, accessibility upgrades and strategic planning for growth.

### Parent Voice

*“Our school’s grounds and infrastructure are 50 years old and falling apart”*

*“Schools are ageing significantly with insufficient funding for basic upkeep.”*

*“New schools are built and have the best and newest resources while original or older school cannot even get necessary repairs let alone upgrades.”*

*“Our [school] roof is leaking and has been for years and there doesn't seem to be a plan to fix it.”*

## Recommendations

**3.1** Implement a transparent, needs-based infrastructure funding model that prioritises schools with the greatest maintenance, safety and accessibility needs.

**3.2** Increase funding for preventative maintenance to address ageing infrastructure and reduce long-term capital costs.

**3.3** Prioritise accessibility upgrades, including ramps, lifts and inclusive facilities, to ensure all ACT public schools are accessible and fit for purpose.

## 4. Inclusion and Student Wellbeing

### Issue

Inclusion, wellbeing and learning are deeply interconnected. ACT public schools are increasingly supporting students with complex learning, behavioural and wellbeing needs, including neurodivergence, disability, trauma and school refusal. While parents acknowledge the commitment of teachers and school leaders, they report that current levels of specialist and allied health support do not meet demand, resulting in long waiting times, delayed assessments and limited access to timely intervention.

Our survey results show that the most commonly identified support needed for children and young people to thrive is “teachers appropriately trained to support student wellbeing”. Parents clearly see teacher capability in inclusion and wellbeing as central to a high-quality public education system, recognising that teachers are the professionals who interact with students most frequently and are best placed to respond to diverse needs when appropriately supported.

The ACT Government’s inclusion coach initiative has the potential to strengthen this capability. ACT Parents is keen to see the outcomes of the program evaluation and its demonstrated impact on classroom practice. ACT Parents believes that the greatest value of inclusion coaches lies in a structured, classroom-based coaching approach, working alongside teachers in real learning environments to build practical skills and confidence, rather than focusing primarily on the development of resources. A strong emphasis on professional capability-building will ensure the

program directly responds to parents' call for better-trained teachers to support inclusion and wellbeing across the system.

We know that when students' learning needs, disability supports or mental health needs are not met early and effectively, the impact is felt across the classroom, school culture and student outcomes. Unmet need often manifests as behavioural challenges, placing pressure on teachers, school leaders and other students. They stress that sustainable improvements in school safety and wellbeing require proactive investment in inclusion and specialist supports, rather than reactive responses once issues escalate.

## Parent Voice

*“Current allied health supports do not meet the needs of students.”*

*“Waiting times are too long.”*

*“More must be done to support kids with disabilities and challenges such as neurodiversity and mental health issues.”*

## Recommendations

**4.1** Continue to invest in inclusive education initiatives, including professional learning, inclusion coaches and resources to support students with disabilities and additional needs.

**4.2** Ensure inclusion and wellbeing funding models are transparent and responsive to student need, with clear communication to families about available supports.

# 5. Parent Engagement and Support for P&C Associations

## Issue

Strong parent engagement is a critical enabler of student wellbeing, learning and positive school cultures. Research consistently shows that when parents are meaningfully engaged in their children's education, student outcomes and wellbeing improve.

ACT Parents has a longstanding role in supporting P&C Associations across the Territory in their governance, compliance and community engagement functions. P&C Associations are volunteer-run organisations that contribute significantly to school communities by fostering social connection, representing parent voice in school decision-making, and supporting initiatives that enhance learning and wellbeing.

Through parent engagement activities, community-building initiatives and targeted fundraising for school priorities, P&Cs help strengthen relationships between families and schools. Targeted investment in P&C capacity ensures these organisations can operate effectively, sustainably and inclusively, maximising their positive impact across ACT public schools.

## **Parent Advocacy Service**

Parents value positive, collaborative relationships with schools, but report that navigating the ACT public education system can be challenging, particularly when issues arise relating to bullying, disability, neurodivergence, trauma, school avoidance or complex learning needs. Existing avenues for support are often fragmented, reactive or only available once conflict has escalated.

Parents report inconsistent communication, limited access to trusted advice, and low confidence in current complaints pathways. When concerns are not resolved early, issues can escalate and relationships breakdown leading to outcomes that are distressing for families and place additional pressure on school staff and the education system.

ACT Parents calls on the ACT Government to provide funding for the establishment of an independent Parent Advocacy Service, delivered by ACT Parents, to provide early, preventative support to families in ACT public schools. The establishment of a Parent Advocacy Service was an ACT Government election commitment, reflecting recognition of the need for earlier, more accessible support for families navigating the public education system. The service would be open to all parents and carers, regardless of their child's background, needs or schooling pathway, and would complement, rather than replace, existing school-based and Directorate processes.

Survey evidence demonstrates overwhelming parent support for an independent advocacy service, with 96 per cent of surveyed parents indicating support. Parents identified the most valuable elements of such a service as trusted, plain-English information; guidance on raising concerns constructively; and support navigating bullying, Individual Learning Plans and school processes.

The Parent Advocacy Service would operate across three tiers:

- **Resources:** Clear, accessible guides to help parents understand what they can reasonably expect from public schools, how to raise concerns respectfully, and how to navigate school and system processes.
- **Coaching and mentoring:** One-to-one support to help parents clarify issues, prepare for meetings, and engage constructively with schools.
- **Advocacy support:** In more complex cases, trained advocates to support or accompany parents in meetings, ensuring concerns are clearly articulated and resolved early.

The service would triage enquiries and, where appropriate, connect families to existing Directorate supports, including case management and specialist services. Its preventative focus would help resolve issues before they escalate, reducing demand on formal complaints mechanisms, improving parent–school relationships, reducing incidences of occupational violence and supporting safer, more inclusive learning environments.

## Parent Voice

*“Targeted support and advocacy would be fabulous”*

*“Independent complaint mechanism and advocacy” is needed*

*“There were no advocacy groups able to support... Absolutely no advocacy or support for the whole distressing process. Traumatic and damaging experience.”*

## Recommendations

**5.1** Deliver on the election commitment to fund a trial of an independent Parent Advocacy Service, delivered by ACT Parents, to provide early, preventative support to families in ACT public schools.

**5.2** Extend and expand grant opportunities for P&C Associations, including Parent Engagement Grants, to build community capacity, connection and engagement.

## Conclusion

Investment in ACT public education strengthens multiple domains of the ACT Wellbeing Framework, including education and lifelong learning, health, safety, social connection, identity and belonging. Schools are foundational community institutions where these domains intersect in practical and lasting ways.

The 2026–27 Budget presents a critical opportunity to reinforce workforce capacity, equity of opportunity, inclusion, infrastructure renewal and meaningful parent engagement across the public system. Targeted, needs-based investment in these areas will improve learning outcomes, support student wellbeing, and strengthen confidence in ACT public education.

ACT Parents looks forward to continuing to work constructively with the ACT Government to support a strong, equitable and sustainable public education system for all ACT families.

# Recommendations

**1.1** Ensure that funding for Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) is maintained to ensure consistent and needs-based allocation of support for students with disability, neurodivergence and additional learning needs.

**1.2** Develop strategies to increase access to relief teachers to minimise the use of split or collapsed classes.

**1.3** Strengthen recruitment and retention strategies for subject-qualified and specialist teachers, including languages and other curriculum areas where shortages affect program quality and consistency.

**1.4** Ensure transparent workforce planning on staffing allocations, specialist teacher coverage and allied health access across ACT public schools.

**2.1** Develop and resource a system-wide approach to equitable access to specialist programs, including music, language education and other academic, sporting and cultural programs, regardless of postcode.

**2.2** Increase recurrent funding to schools based on student and community need, with an explicit focus on expanding educational opportunities in under-served areas.

**3.1** Implement a transparent, needs-based infrastructure funding model that prioritises schools with the greatest maintenance, safety and accessibility needs.

**3.2** Increase funding for preventative maintenance to address ageing infrastructure and reduce long-term capital costs.

**3.3** Prioritise accessibility upgrades, including ramps, lifts and inclusive facilities, to ensure all ACT public schools are accessible and fit for purpose.

**4.1** Continue to invest in inclusive education initiatives, including professional learning, inclusion coaches and resources to support students with disabilities and additional needs.

**4.2** Ensure inclusion and wellbeing funding models are transparent and responsive to student need, with clear communication to families about available supports.

**5.1** Fund a trial of an independent Parent Advocacy Service, delivered by ACT Parents, to provide early, preventative support to families in ACT public schools.

**5.2** Extend and expand grant opportunities for P&C Associations, including Parent Engagement Grants, to build community capacity, connection and engagement.