

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 3 – EDUCATION

**INQUIRY INTO PLANNING AND DELIVERY OF SCHOOL
INFRASTRUCTURE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

CORRECTED

At Room 814-815, Parliament House, Sydney, on Monday 9 May 2022

The Committee met at 10:15

PRESENT

The Hon. Mark Latham (Chair)
Ms Abigail Boyd
The Hon. Anthony D'Adam
The Hon. Wes Fang (Deputy Chair)
The Hon. Scott Farlow
The Hon. Courtney Houssos
The Hon. Shaoquett Moselmane

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Catherine Cusack

*Please note:
[inaudible] is used when audio words cannot be deciphered.

[audio malfunction] is used when words are lost due to a technical malfunction.
[disorder] is used when members or witnesses speak over one another.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the first hearing of the Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education inquiry into the planning and delivery of school infrastructure in New South Wales. Before I commence, it is the custom of this Parliament to acknowledge the traditional inhabitants of this land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I do that with all due respect, as well as acknowledging other important contributors to the history of this site: those who constructed the Parliament House building and also the parliamentary staff, who over many decades have supported MPs and made our work and representative roles possible. We acknowledge and thank them all.

Today we will be hearing from a range of stakeholders, most importantly, the transparency organisation the Audit Office of NSW, also the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW, the Teachers Federation, Tweed Shire Council, local P&C groups from Lennox Head and Ulladulla, as well as parents from the Gillieston primary school in the Hunter Valley.

Before we commence, I would like to make a few comments about the procedures for today's hearing. We are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. A transcript will be on the website when it becomes available. In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, media representatives are reminded to take responsibility for what they publish. Parliamentary privilege applies to these proceedings but it does not apply to what witnesses might say outside the evidence of the hearing. Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the cover of parliamentary privilege. Leave that to the MPs; we look after that. In this regard, it is important that witnesses focus on the issues at hand.

Witnesses all have a right to procedural fairness according to the resolution of the House in 2018. If witnesses cannot answer a question today, it is available to them to take it on notice and provide an answer in writing within 21 days. If anyone needs documents handed up by staff, that is permissible. In terms of the audibility of the hearing today, I remind both Committee members and witnesses to speak into the microphones. For witnesses appearing remotely, please ensure your microphones are muted when you are not speaking. Everyone, of course, turn off their mobile phones.

Ms MARGARET CRAWFORD, Auditor-General of New South Wales, affirmed and examined

Ms CLAUDIA MIGOTTO, Assistant Auditor-General of New South Wales, affirmed and examined

Mr MICHAEL THISTLETHWAITE, Director, Performance Audit, Audit Office of New South Wales, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our first set of witnesses from the Audit Office of New South Wales: Margaret Crawford, Claudia Migotto and Michael Thistlethwaite. Is there an opening statement you would like to make to the Committee please?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: Thank you, Chair, very, very briefly. Firstly, could I thank you for the invitation to speak to your Committee today. As I said in our submission to this inquiry, the effective planning and delivery of infrastructure to meet the needs of the community has been and will continue to be an area of focus for my audit program. I have conducted two performance audits on this topic in the Education cluster in recent years. Of particular interest today is my April 2021 report titled *Delivering school infrastructure*. This examined the period up to June 2020, so pre-COVID and quite a while back now.

The objective of this audit was to assess the effectiveness of planning and delivery of new, upgraded and redeveloped schools to meet demand for public school education in New South Wales. The audit found that while the department had updated and improved its long-term strategic plan, further work needed to be done on developing and advising Government on a pipeline of priority projects. The report found that the department had focused on existing projects, election commitments and other Government announcements and that this had diverted attention from identifying and advising on projects that could better meet present and future student needs.

My 2021 report made eight recommendations. Largely these focus on prioritising school infrastructure projects over a longer period—over a 10-year period—strengthening the quality of the project cost estimates and establishing a continuous improvement program. Interestingly, the department did support the recommendations but had asked us if the recommendations could be done over a 12-month period. We were asking for a six-month period. We kept the six months because we were really hoping that they could—well, number one, a lot of the work had already been, according to them, in progress; and number two, we wanted those recommendations in place before this budget so that they could inform this budget process. Apart from that, we really do not know now the status, so we are not going to be able to answer questions specific to the current status.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Can I very much thank the three of you for your attendance today and, of course, for your two excellent reports, which really form the basis of much of our discussions. I appreciate what you are saying, that obviously you have done your reports and so it is a reflection back rather than necessarily a reflection on what is currently being debated. On that note, can I just ask you, do you have future audits planned in the school infrastructure space?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: We are actually in the process at the moment of developing our next forward program, but I do not think we have a specific school infrastructure project over the next 12 months. Claudia?

CLAUDIA MIGOTTO: Not specifically. I think for the forward program we might consider it as a cross-cutting thing, particularly with significant disruption to the education sector, how is Government responding to changes there and reflecting that in the infrastructure needs of schools as well? That is the consideration that we are going through at the moment.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You can see this Committee's interest, obviously, in the program and how it is being rolled out. In terms of your recommendations and the time frame for them to be implemented, do any of your ongoing audits of the education system—do they then check back in on these?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: No, not necessarily, unless we decide to do a specific audit again in this space. In some respects the 2021 audit was checking in following our 2017 audit, but that is not—we do not do that for all of our audits. The normal process, as you would be aware, is that 12 to 18 months following a performance audit, the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly does do follow-up on our recommendations and receives advice from agencies as to the status of their action.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: All right. We do not like to leave things to our lower House colleagues. We like to do it ourselves up here. I might just turn specifically to your 2021 response. One of the issues—we have done a number of site visits as a Committee. We have done some to the north-west and some to the south-west of Sydney. What really struck us in both of those is the way that poor planning obviously then requires a lot of demountables, which in itself—we heard different evidence about the quality of the learning

space, but one of the concerns I think for the Committee was the fact that it is very much compromising playground space. I noticed that in your report you talked about "increased quality of education - spatial density". Did that consider playground space or was that more about the actual size of the blocks themselves?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: It did not go specifically to the matter of demountables. I think our report recognised that there was a need for temporary arrangements in a lot of schools, so it did not comment specifically on the implications of that for playground space. Is that correct?

CLAUDIA MIGOTTO: That is correct. We did not go specifically, in the report, to how the adequacy of playground spaces was considered in the planning process as well.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Did your report look at the relative size of blocks? One thing that has really struck us is the size of blocks seems to be getting smaller and smaller.

MARGARET CRAWFORD: It did not comment on that.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That does not form part of the business case analysis that you were doing?

MICHAEL THISTLETHWAITE: The size of the block forms part of the business case. Our findings were really around that early consultation with stakeholders and ensuring that the schools would be fit for purpose. We did talk about schools being fit for purpose in the report, which would include things such as the size of the block.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I did not see in the report—you said that there were 12 case studies that you analysed. Did I miss that in the report or is that something that you deliberately did not include?

CLAUDIA MIGOTTO: We analysed those 12 as a cohort. We do not specifically reference all of them.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I did not know if there were a few—

CLAUDIA MIGOTTO: We have used them as case studies to highlight where we identified issues.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Would you mind taking it on notice and, if you can, providing us with the 12? If not and if you do not want to, that is okay.

CLAUDIA MIGOTTO: We will take it on notice.

MARGARET CRAWFORD: We will take that on notice.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I wanted to go to the question of the planning projections and the way that interacts with the business case. Some of the evidence that we have heard on our site visits is that the development is happening much faster than expected, the development is happening much more quickly, perhaps families have bigger sizes than they expected, or, even in some parts of the State, because of housing affordability we are seeing two families move into houses instead of just one, which is obviously causing much more rapid growth. Did your analysis look at, in terms of the business case, the quality of the planning projections information that was provided?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: It was certainly looking not so much at the quality of that but the way the agencies work together to make sure that they were taking into account the most current and relevant information for planning purposes. There is some commentary in the report around ways that, I suppose, local changes could be brought to attention. Basically, it is arguing for greater cooperation, or continued cooperation, between agencies to get the best projections possible. Michael, did you want to add to that?

MICHAEL THISTLETHWAITE: Yes. I will add that the department is reliant on the New South Wales State Government's Common Planning Assumptions, which are based fundamentally on census data, which can become outdated. The department does do some work to validate that at a local school level, but it is certainly a challenge for the department in having accurate population forecasts in order to ensure that they are meeting the local need.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: We heard from principals that they were literally, at the end of the school year, phoning around developers to find out how many blocks they were going to have coming online. They are trying to do their own projections at a local level. There is clearly a breakdown in the planning process. There is clearly an issue with the information that is being given to schools when they are filling so quickly and requiring so many demountables. That is something that certainly our inquiry is very interested in.

MARGARET CRAWFORD: It was definitely part of our recommendations that there be close cooperation to try to do better in that space. Having said that, I think our report also recognised improvement on

what had been happening previously. So while there is always room for further improvement, things had progressed quite well.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I had a couple more questions. In your 2017 report and again in your 2021 report, you make the acknowledgement that we are going to run out of classrooms. When you talk about that, are you factoring into demountable classrooms?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: We are basing that on the predictions of the department. We are not making our own assessment; we are relying on the assessment of the department.

CLAUDIA MIGOTTO: My understanding is that learning spaces include the demountables as well, but that might be a point of clarification with the department.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I have one final question. In 2017 your performance audit said that over the next 15 years the population of the schools will increase by 21 per cent, which is a pretty significant increase. But, given what we have seen in parts of particularly the outer suburbs of Sydney, we think that is probably on track. As part of either of your analyses, did you do any analysis to see whether that was across the board or whether that was specifically around some local school districts?

CLAUDIA MIGOTTO: We were looking at how School Infrastructure NSW was making that assessment itself. So I think it really goes back to our earlier announcement about the basis of their projections and some of the limitations with that.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Thank you very much for your report. When you looked through the report, I think at the time, school in funding increased by 5½ times on what it was in 2015-16. In the last budget, it has now increased sevenfold from that figure. How much of an impact did you find that sort of growth and expenditure was having on School Infrastructure NSW in managing that large amount of money and, effectively, upskilling with so many more projects each and every year?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: Our report does acknowledge a large increase in the budget and the announcement of a large number of new projects. School Infrastructure NSW was really set up to respond to that: to put in place the expertise that the department needed to deliver on the commitments of Government. That is really what it was very focused on. I am not sure that it was overwhelmed by that but it was actually set up to deliver on that commitment of Government.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Do you think it is set up to continue to deliver with that sort of growth?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: Again, we cannot comment on what is happening in the last couple of years, but at the time it was certainly progressing through delivery of the commitments. What we commented on was that it was so focused on the large number of projects that had already been announced, it was not doing enough work to prioritise future projects over the longer term.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: With respect to the 12 case studies, how much variance was there between the business plans of those 12 case studies? Were there some that you found to be particularly good or were there some that were particularly poor? What do you attribute some of that variance to, if there was that variance?

MICHAEL THISTLETHWAITE: Largely, I think we found that the business cases that were in place before School Infrastructure NSW was established were not as robust. We certainly identified in the report that since the establishment of School Infrastructure NSW, there had been a maturing of project methodologies, including business cases looking a lot better than they were in previous years.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: In terms of that improvement in business cases, what were you seeing in terms of the changes that were delivered on the ground, effectively, for schools? Were they matching the population growth better because of that planning from School Infrastructure NSW and those business plans?

MICHAEL THISTLETHWAITE: Some of the business cases were not at the stage of project delivery, so they were approved business cases. What the report refers to is better scope identification, better risk management and better budget planning approaches. Although we do still note that there are opportunities for further improvement in those regards as well.

The CHAIR: Ms Crawford, when you said, "At this stage we've got no idea whether the Government is acting on the recommendations because they've taken a 12-month implementation time frame," is it the practice of the Audit Office to write to Ministers every three months to say, "Can you give us an update?" Or do you just wait for their final deliberation?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: No, that is not our practice. Our practice is to rely on the normal process, which is the follow-up by the Public Accounts Committee of all of our performance audits 12 to 18 months after they are completed. We then support the committee in directing the areas of attention and providing any information that we do have to help them inquire into the status of response to our recommendations. Occasionally we may choose to do a further performance audit that goes specifically to follow up, but that is a choice we make on occasion.

The CHAIR: In your opening statement and also in the report you referred to the fact that there is too much focus on delivering existing projects, election commitments and other Government announcements. In the world of politics, we take that as code for pork-barrelling. You also say there is a need for "evidence-based cost-benefit analysis framework for school investment". Is there any evidence of the evidence-based cost-benefit analysis at the core of what is happening inside School Infrastructure NSW?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: First, could I correct you? I do not think we said there was too much focus being paid to the delivery of government projects. We said that there was focus being paid to that and, perhaps, not enough focus being placed on establishing priorities for the future. In terms of the quality of the business cases, my colleague Michael has already commented that we saw good improvement in that space but there was still room for further improvement. I am not sure that I can comment beyond that.

The CHAIR: Are the business cases published? Is there an argument for their publication?

MICHAEL THISTLETHWAITE: The business cases are not published, no.

The CHAIR: Do you believe there is an argument to publish them, in the name of transparency?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: I do not think we can comment on that because it was not in our report. We are all for transparency, but a business case is an internal document of government mostly. They are developed to help deliver on a project. Transparency is always good.

The CHAIR: I think it would help. When parents get upset about a sea of demountables, naturally and emotionally wanting the best for their children, I think government really needs to give an explanation as to how it got it so badly wrong, like with Oran Park Public School—the one I know best—in south-west Sydney. On that planning forward approach, from where I have lived for so long, going back to Laurie Brereton and "beds to the west"—the constant struggle in western Sydney with these growth areas that have now accelerated over the past five years beyond anything we have ever seen—there is an ongoing argument about the government provision not just in schools but health and other services, like transport, roads and rail, for growth areas.

One of the things we have elicited so far in this inquiry is that School Infrastructure NSW works with DPIE demographers at a local government data level, which seems like a very broad brush. Blacktown local government area is the biggest in the country. It is almost as big as Tasmania. It is not all that useful to be hovering at LGA data level. School Infrastructure NSW then tries to drill down to school catchment areas for its forward planning, using its 15 staff and other government agencies. Wouldn't it make a lot of sense, whether we are talking about health, schools or transport, to have a standardised area of expertise, an area inside government that has accurate, sophisticated forecasting, down to census collector districts, of how many people are going to be living in this geographic space, and then build all government planning around that forecast growth so that we get it right? Some of these things are off the radar ridiculous. For instance, 1.3 million people are going to move in west of the M7, but there is no government allocation for land for a new public hospital for a new city effectively the size of Adelaide, which has four public hospitals.

We go through this cycle of Ministers resisting sophisticated demographic planning, allegations of pork-barrelling, an election cycle, the other side gets in and the same thing happens. Don't we need some consolidated cross-government demographic planning unit that publishes information about where we are expecting people to go and itemises the natural servicing needs of that community in education, health and all of the State responsibilities? Then that is all transparent and we can judge the decisions of government around more sophisticated demographic planning. There is a lot there, but wouldn't it solve a 50-year problem in western Sydney of people coming without the services arriving?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: Mr Latham, I think we have to stick to what we looked at in this audit. We did comment on improved planning and consultation between agencies. We also did call for further improvements that should be made to capture that local level information. There are internal government arrangements within education that provide local input into the process. I do not think I can comment beyond that.

The CHAIR: But do you find this problem in other areas of audit analysis—that it is in hospitals, it is in community health centres and it is in transport—that we have not got transparent, sophisticated demographic planning data that does justice to the servicing needs of growth areas like outer western Sydney?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: I am not sure that we have called that out in our other audits.

CLAUDIA MIGOTTO: The only one that I can summon to mind is our report on sharing school facilities, which looked at the need to take a broader district level view about the need for schools and other types of facilities in particular areas. As the Auditor-General said, what we have gone to in this report is the improvements that have been made. We have identified options for further improvements and then, ultimately, I think it is up to the department to work out how to take those recommendations forward.

The CHAIR: Could I suggest that it is something that could be looked at? It would help solve a lot of problems across a lot of portfolios. All of this stuff is so haphazard and random. I met with Brad Hazzard about that new public hospital in outer western Sydney and had the then health department chief there, who said, "Based on the Finnish model, we don't build any more new public hospitals in New South Wales." I thought that is not much comfort for people in outer western Sydney, who will see them going up in Rouse Hill and extensions elsewhere in country hospitals. It is such an arbitrary, haphazard way of doing it. It is the same with schools, where at Oran Park, looking at the sea of demountables there at one time, it felt like it was a complete rip-off of the local community compared to what other places had been provided by way of school infrastructure. I think it is an interesting area, where a government across all portfolios could improve with some transparent, sophisticated demographic planning that goes beyond LGA data and then trying to scramble around to work out what it means for a school catchment.

MARGARET CRAWFORD: Clearly, in our audit program we have focused on infrastructure projects in health, transport and the like, and we continue to do so. We will take on board your comments in our planning process for our next work program, Mr Latham.

The CHAIR: In your report, you made mention of the need for better sharing of data on the forecast needs with relevant planning agencies. Is it a question of sharing data or everyone having access to the very best data with some new sophisticated unit inside government? It does all seem very random—the way these things are decided upon. If you are a pork-barrelling Minister, I think your great friend is a lack of hard, reliable demographic data, where you can just say, "We really don't know where the people are going to move". So for political reasons, they are building a school or a hospital in a certain place.

MARGARET CRAWFORD: Again, this audit actually found that there had been improvements in the sharing of common data in relation to planning but recognised, as Michael said, that sometimes that information is no longer as current as you would want. So there is a need for local input as well, and we made that recommendation for going forward.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Other questions?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I have got a couple.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I have one. You indicated in your opening statement, Ms Crawford, that your audit found that further work is required on a pipeline of projects. Sorry, I am sitting in for another colleague. Could you elaborate on this pipeline of projects that you are required to do?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: What we are after there is for longer term planning. To build a school or to make school improvements is a lot of money, and there is a high level of need across the State. What we are arguing for there is that more effort is needed to go into planning for priorities. What we found was that the department is quite good now at doing needs assessment, but translating those needs assessments into where the key priorities are for projects was what was lacking at that time. That is what we are calling for.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Crawford, you talked about how there were some areas where the budget-funded projects were not identified as needed by the department of education. One of those, we know through some other work that we have done through SO 52s, is the South Nowra-Worrigee school that has been promised down there. I appreciate that may fall outside of your time frame. Are you able to tell us which were the projects that you identified that were not needed but still being pursued? I am happy for you to take it on notice.

MARGARET CRAWFORD: It is okay up to a point. I am not sure we said schools were not needed. Even for ones that were previously announced by government, there is always a business case conducted before construction occurs. So need is established. What we are arguing for, though, is I guess a relative thing—the relative merits of one project over another. I think there is an exhibit—exhibit four—in our report that sets out what was recommended by the department versus announcements made.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Our time is about to run out, but what I would like to do is as you consider, going forward, your future program of audits, I would just encourage you to consider looking again into School Infrastructure NSW. Some of the information that we have found around the Tullawong Public School and the way that the projections are being considered and then treated for the total economic cost and planning,

and the way the money is being funded—anyway, I have a couple of emails that we have received through an order under Standing Order 52. I think they would be helpful for you to see that there are still serious concerns about the way that the department is running the building of schools. I would be interested, if you do have any reflections, on notice—I do not want to put you on the spot today, but if you would like to have a look at these and then tell us anything that you would consider concerning from that, that would be helpful.

MARGARET CRAWFORD: Certainly, we will take that into consideration in addition to the Chair's request about planning processes.

The CHAIR: Just on that, having said that it would be good to publish the cost-benefit studies for major capital works, if the Minister deviates from those recommendations, do you think it is a good idea to also require the Minister to publish in writing the reasons they have deviated from the School Infrastructure NSW recommendation?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: Mr Latham, I could not comment on that because that is not something I have specifically audited.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Ms Crawford, apologies that I cannot remember whether I read this or not in your report, but did you look at the infrastructure funding from the department to private schools as well as public schools?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: We did not in this report, no.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Is that something on your radar, the sort of level of government funding that is going to private school infrastructure?

MARGARET CRAWFORD: It has not been something that we have audited specifically. We did do an audit previously on funding to schools—more operational funding.

CLAUDIA MIGOTTO: It was generally on funding to non-government schools.

MARGARET CRAWFORD: Yes.

CLAUDIA MIGOTTO: That audit did find in some areas some opportunities to improve transparency around how that funding was used. That is probably the most direct finding to the question that you are asking.

The CHAIR: As there are no other questions, I thank the witnesses for their participation and the quality of their report on school infrastructure and all the other tremendous general work you do. I have mentioned that at another committee. Certainly I, and I know other members of Parliament, really appreciate the quality of what the Audit Office does in an environment where sometimes government does not want to hear these things. We certainly appreciate your professionalism and directness in making certain outcomes known to us. Thanks again.

MARGARET CRAWFORD: Thank you, again, Chair, and I do acknowledge all the staff in the Audit Office. I am very blessed to have such a professional group of people.

The CHAIR: Thanks for your time this morning.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr ALAN GARDINER, Secretary, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW, affirmed and examined

Ms YVONNE HILSZ, Vice-President, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Good morning, Yvonne and Alan. Thank you for your time and your participation representing the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW. Thank you for your submission. It is also available to you now to make a short opening statement to the Committee if you wish.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes, I can spend a few minutes. I did take the opportunity to read some of the other submissions, and I am pleased to see that some of the comments that we made came through there. I would just like to highlight to begin with, reading particularly the other submissions from P&Cs, the degree of frustration that comes through in dealing with School Infrastructure NSW, particularly with respect to secrecy. As an example, there are a couple of comments in a number of submissions about non-disclosure agreements, which are required from community representatives on project reference groups. I think that is definitely worth challenging and has been in a number of the submissions.

Also, on the terms of reference 1 (h) about school design that promotes health and safety, our submission did not include many comments. Upon reflection, I think we can add a few points there. The ones that I particularly point out would be to ensure that schools have adequate play space, recreational areas, place to eat lunch—both undercover and not undercover. I think that was brought out in a couple of the P&C submissions. Another point on that topic that I would raise is air conditioning. You may recall that government policy is that all new school buildings should be air conditioned. However, unless that has changed in the last two years, my understanding of that policy is that it refers to teaching spaces and does not include offices, staffrooms, principals' offices et cetera, and maybe not even the sick bay. I think, personally, that that is wrong. It is astonishing to me that anyone would build office space these days which is not air conditioned. It detracts, of course, from the working conditions of the people who are there, which is detrimental to education.

While we are talking about admin areas, as schools are expanded, my observation—perhaps not with full evidence but certainly anecdotally—I doubt that the support areas, offices and admin actually keep up proportionally with the size of the school following any expansion. I would look at that if in your position. As a final comment, there are a couple of references in various submissions to cluster planning, or area planning, of district schools and master planning of school sites. I think that would be highly desirable. But my current assessment is that School Infrastructure is more reactive and they are not really at the point where they are able or actually planning ahead in any sensible way. I am certainly happy to talk more about that at some future point in your questioning. That concludes my opening statement. Obviously, we are happy to take any questions.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thank you for your submission and especially for your time today. I want to start where you started, which is the importance of play space. That has been an issue raised previously with the Auditor-General. It has certainly been an issue that has really struck us on our site visits. We have done a number of visits in the north-west and the south-west of metropolitan Sydney. The exponential growth of the school is then impacted by seeing demountables placed on play areas. There was one school in particular that is facing the loss of almost its entire play space next year as it tries to accommodate the growth but also then construct some new classrooms. The really interesting feedback for us from the principal was that they are having two issues. We are having behavioural issues because kids are not being able to get out the energy that they need to.

YVONNE HILSZ: Correct.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: But when they are getting out and finally exercising, they are actually running into each other, which is then causing behavioural issues and more issues for the teachers.

YVONNE HILSZ: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Especially in these new growth areas where we do not see a lot of backyards, or smaller sized backyards, play space at school actually becomes more important. I would be interested in any thoughts that you have or any feedback that you have received from your members specifically around the importance of play space.

YVONNE HILSZ: Yes, absolutely, thank you. It is interesting too, yes, with all the demountable space when there is a lack of teaching rooms as well and then the demountables take up space. But the other issue is there is not actually enough covered area for children to play on wet days. Given our climate currently and the

number of wet days we have had in Sydney, many of the children are not even allowed out into these areas which are uncovered for play, for recess and for lunch. And then feedback for not only the children being frustrated for not having outside space, they then are not getting a break from the teacher, not being able to vent out and then the teacher is having difficulty getting the kids settled down because they actually have not changed from the classroom for a break; they are staying inside all day. These are schools which actually have outside areas, so they are not inside buildings, which some of our schools are, but they do not have covered areas that they can safely run to or walk to, to be able to actually have play. That is in addition to schools which also have demountables taking up valuable space purely because of lack of teaching space area. So, yes, it is a problem.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: One of the things that we had heard from the department is that there is a move towards building schools without school ovals. What would your opinion be on that, particularly for high school students?

ALAN GARDINER: It is not the right policy.

YVONNE HILSZ: No.

ALAN GARDINER: They need the area, high school students as well.

YVONNE HILSZ: Particularly.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes, for the same reasons.

YVONNE HILSZ: If you think, yourself, if you are sitting inside all day, which no doubt is the majority now of the workforce, it is not productive for us, but it is even harder for these children, particularly when they are going through big growth spurts and hormones. They need to get out and play. If we want them to be activated and learning, we need to let them at least physically have some activity. If we look at how we are wanting to create healthy environments with our food and our canteens, providing healthy food for students, part of that needs more physical play as well. We do not want to have a generation of children not getting enough physical activity because we are not giving them enough land to play on. It is not only good for their learning but also for their physical and mental health as well. These children in the last two years have already had diminished amounts of playtime with COVID and with restrictions of being either homeschooled or home-taught. But then, when they have gone back into schools within COVID, to help reduce and minimise if there is an outbreak of COVID, they are being restricted for what time they get on the playground and then they are having to restrict the amount of children coming out. So they have already had major restrictions in the last two years. That is with schools who actually have facilities to house kids to be able to have play areas.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes, if there is any move by the department to limit the amount of play space that is provided, I think that is just penny-pinching and any kind of discussion to justify it is just trying to hide that is where they are going. I think there should be recognition that all children are different and there are some children in particular who just need more physical activity during the day as part of their education. Other children are probably fine without so much, but that is not going to work for every child. There are differences.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Just on that, obviously all children are quite different and there are some children that need a quiet space sometimes.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: What are your experiences of how many schools have that sort of facility and what is needed?

YVONNE HILSZ: I do not have evidence for actually what the statistics are but certainly as an active P&C member, which I have been now for five years and have been on the board since last year, there is a real struggle not only for the physical space but to provide a quiet place. There is also a staffing issue. With the teacher shortage—and that is a different topic, I am sure, for a different room—there are not enough facilities for many schools to have enough teachers on the playground for the outside activities, which obviously need supervision, and to then create more quiet spaces as well. They either do not have safe areas which are not already being used or facilities to have supervision there. You have to have supervision if you are segregating certain children.

I have certainly known in some of my area there is a concern for not providing needs for those children who are overstimulated by being in a general classroom. Can I say that the ratio of children per classroom and the size of classrooms is overstimulating for children, I think, even without those who are recognised as needing more quiet areas. They are already squashed in their classrooms and then do not have enough time to decompress in the playground. Certainly, to your point, I think for many schools they are struggling to find a sufficient quiet area that is supervised and also allows for enough children to actually feel that they have had some time out. I do not have any specific evidence, only what I hear from parents.

ALAN GARDINER: Again, anecdotally, in my 20 years of having one or more children in the public education system, I have never seen a school with a quiet space, so I think that is a gap.

YVONNE HILSZ: No, I have not either. It is a library, but that is not the quiet space.

ALAN GARDINER: That is not necessarily a quiet space either.

YVONNE HILSZ: And the librarians are on the school grounds as part of their supervision for the rest of the school.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I wanted to move on to a slightly different question around schooling zonings. That is something that this Committee has pursued in a different forum. But I am really interested in the role where your members give you feedback about the role of parents in consultation if there are changes to those school zonings. The other thing that I am interested in is, obviously there is some capacity to engage with parents who are currently at the school, but we know that families are making decisions about where they move and where they want to send their children when they are purchasing a home.

YVONNE HILSZ: Correct.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So is there any capacity to engage with parents before they actually get to school?

ALAN GARDINER: To my knowledge, parents are not consulted at all, or school communities at all, about changes to catchment areas of schools.

YVONNE HILSZ: No. We had a zoning change three years ago in my school and only found out after letters were sent out to parents saying, "Your child is no longer in the zone. We are not accepting your child next year."

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: How do you feel about that as the peak representative of parents?

ALAN GARDINER: It is poor. My local high school had a zoning change at the end of 2021, quite recently, and we found out when a slightly shell-shocked principal said, "I have just been told that next year there are zoning changes and that over the next couple of years our school numbers will increase by another 200-plus students."

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: How does that affect the role of parents in terms of being partners in education if it is just simply dropped on them? They have made life decisions about where they are going to move, the school that they are planning to send their children, and yet there is no consultation about changes to school zonings with them.

ALAN GARDINER: I think you can draw your own conclusions. It can be quite significant.

YVONNE HILSZ: I am primary school and what that does is that I find that in some demographics where there is option for private and budget availability for parents to go private, they go to private. There is more stability. I do not know if there is more collaboration between I think their PTAs and the parent community but, given the fees that they pay and that what they then receive back seems to be different, where parents do have a choice, they will move out of primary public education, and by year 5 many have already started to move into private because they have got more stability of zoning as well.

ALAN GARDINER: That is right—more control over where their child ends up. Again, probably outside the scope of this Committee, I think there is a good reason to have a general look at catchment areas of schools. There are definitely plenty of anomalies floating around and also influenced by the availability of girls' schools, boys' high schools et cetera and co-ed schools. But even apart from that, as an example, my recollection is that for a student living in Berowra, where the nearest high schools would be Asquith girls and Asquith boys, they are actually zoned for Gosford—makes not a lot of sense. As an example closer to me, Killarney Heights High School includes a zone which is across Middle Harbour, which makes it very hard to get to, although as the crow flies it might be relatively close. That is not actually a good decision.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: But it goes to a problem, which is that school zoning needs to be done locally in consultation with parents, in consultation with school communities and not just simply as lines drawn on a map by a bureaucrat somewhere.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes, I understand trying to change a school boundary can be extremely controversial for reasons that you outlined, but that is to me not a reason to shy away from doing it.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So the P&C would definitely agree that there needs to be parent consultation as part of that.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes—effectively community consultation with future parents as well.

YVONNE HILSZ: Absolutely.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I would completely agree with that, so that is very helpful.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Just following up on those points, is that what you meant in your introductory remarks, Mr Gardiner, when you referred to secrecy?

ALAN GARDINER: Only one aspect. Actually, what I had more in mind at the time was about school building programs and what is going on there—what is approved; what is in the pipeline, if there is a pipeline; and even design processes and the NDA, for instance, with a project reference group which is set up. For every proposed new build, there is a project reference group that has one P&C representative, but that person has to sign a non-disclosure agreement so they cannot discuss any of the proposal or options which might be on the table with anybody else. So all the consultation is on that individual's shoulders, which is both unfair and wrong, and I think excessive secrecy.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: But also is counterintuitive to the role that they should be playing as a community representative, right?

ALAN GARDINER: Yes, that is right.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: They should be able to consult with the community and then reflect the community views as part of the planning process.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes, and that would explain why in quite a few submissions there are references to these NDAs. That is more the context, but secrecy generally is an issue, I think, with school infrastructure.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You have recounted a number of inadequacies in terms of playgrounds, play space undercover, air conditioning and various other issues that you have raised. Who do you raise those issues to? Do you raise them with the department or do you raise them directly with the Minister or the school principals? I am just curious as to what responses you get as a federation. Do they take the federation seriously? What work do you do, and how much does the Government or the Minister and the planning department respond to your concerns?

YVONNE HILSZ: I think there is a multi-step part. At a local level, the P&C would hopefully be collaborating or working with the principal. If there is a fracture between the principal and the P&C then that might be escalated faster. The P&C picks up a lot of funding sometimes to get these COLAs, which are the outdoor learning environments. For some schools who have a very active P&C and are in a demographic that they can do their own private fundraising, they can fast-track and get some of these projects underway and complete, provided that assets and infrastructure can get them done. But for schools that do not have that funding arm or a committee of people who can take on the volunteer work—we are volunteers doing this. There are many, many hours behind an election barbecue or various fundraising elements.

At the local level, the parents would be trying to work with the principal. If they do not get support, they would escalate it through to their department. Some schools would then start to go broader and look at their local members to ask, "How can you help? Do you have other avenues?" There is only so much a parent body can fund before assets have to be involved. It is not like if I said, "I have \$100,000. Let's go build a classroom." Just because we have the money does not mean we get the build. There is always that challenge. Funding is an issue, but even if you have funding, you might still be in a queue for three to five years to get it done. As a federation, Alan has more reference here as to what we do.

ALAN GARDINER: My summary comment would be: Talking to School Infrastructure on these kinds of issues is like talking into a void. We make comments. I do not know where they go or what happens. It is hard to see what has changed as a result.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Do they write back and say, "Look, we'll be doing this"?

YVONNE HILSZ: Not in a timely manner.

ALAN GARDINER: When we get comments back, they are standard departmental responses. "Thank you for your input. We are looking at it," et cetera. I do not think there is a lot of substance, in general, coming back. Again, that ties in with my comment about speaking into a void. I think what that also engenders—and I feel this personally—is a sense of jadedness. What is the point? It just does not do anything.

YVONNE HILSZ: And at a local level, you get a community that—guns are blazing for fundraising. You have a window of opportunity when you have a certain group of parents who are very motivated to improve the resources and opportunities within the school. If they start to get fatigued or they really see that nothing is happening, that parent body and that group of parents will suddenly wane, or they will graduate out of the school. Then you are left with a school that either has to find another committed group of parents—and the school does not find it. It comes from within the parent community. If that does not happen—once again, we are in public education. They will say, "If we've got other options, we will choose them."

Unfortunately it leaves a school without a mechanism to rally up enough support to shake the can to find some funding. It really should not be at the grassroots level that a parent is having to fund basketball courts and put in preschool playground areas just so the kids have somewhere to play. Eventually parents say, "If we can find enough money, does that help fast-track it?" Sometimes it does, sometimes it does not. But the funding responsibility still seems to feel a lot more skewed if a P&C can rally behind it and champion it, because a principal also has to manage and run the school. They are not there for fundraising and project managing and doing asset management. I know that they are, but we still want them to be focused on educating our children, not trying to figure out where they are going to find \$50,000 to put in a playground just so our kids have a good environment to play.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: On a couple of other inquiries in relation to transport projects that I have been on, we have heard from schools and parents who have been concerned about the impact of air pollution on the children, particularly where there is no air conditioning in classrooms. We have schools that are actively running "idle off" programs where they are making sure that people are not idling their cars outside, but then you have massive construction projects and other things impacting on the air quality. To your knowledge, is there any prioritisation of air conditioning for either schools that are going to bear the brunt of the hot weather soonest or schools that are in those heavily polluted areas?

YVONNE HILSZ: And throw in a bit of COVID.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes, exactly.

ALAN GARDINER: I have not heard about anything specifically to do with air pollution, but I am aware of the departmental policy regarding the school temperature threshold. I think it was over 30 degrees in January et cetera.

YVONNE HILSZ: Mean maximum.

ALAN GARDINER: It has been prioritised. There is still a backlog of schools to be upgraded in that area, but all schools should have air conditioning, heating and cooling. As you know, there are still plenty of schools which have gas heating, unflued and flued. I think we should be past the whole concept of gas heating in the first place, for other reasons. There is certainly a backlog there. As I say, all schools should be fully air conditioned, including the offices.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: The science around the impact of gas heating on children—particularly in relation to rates of asthma et cetera, as well as background air pollution—is getting more and more every year. It is getting better and better, and our understanding is growing. Have you seen any change from the department in its focus on those issues in the last few years?

YVONNE HILSZ: We saw some with COVID. Obviously there is a big thing around air ventilation, and that has highlighted the need that was already growing as a problem, which was ventilation generally in schools. I have not seen anything expedited fast enough, though, to get ventilation happening in schools. I know air purifiers went in. They did a report last year, so there have been machines put in classrooms, but overall I still think there is a massive gap. Also, look at the size of classrooms. Some of these classrooms have 30 kids in them, and they were never designed to have 30 children in the class. Never mind outside of the COVID challenges, you have rooms that are not ventilated well overpopulated with 30 kids.

To your earlier point about having time out, these classrooms now do not even have spaces in their rooms for a child to sit in the corner and just catch a moment. That is why they are being put outside the classroom, where they are often not supervised. But the teacher does not have a facility in the room to go, "Child, go and sit in the corner and catch a moment." I imagine all of us at some point in our lives would appreciate being in the corner to catch a breath. We have multiple issues of overcrowded classrooms and poor ventilation. Aside from the weather and the climate, now we have COVID challenges that are not being addressed quick enough. And then, we have children not being able to get enough outside time due to uncovered areas; therefore, they cannot play outside. And then, we just do not have enough classrooms.

We could talk about toilets all day. Could I just talk about the state of toilets in our schools? It is absolutely disgraceful. We have children who live in housing estates who probably have better access to toilets than our children in all schools. I have schools in high socio-economic areas that have worse toilets than other schools. There should not be a difference between what socio-economic area you are in, but the toilets that our children have to go to the bathroom in are absolutely disgraceful. We have parents complaining that their children have UTIs—bladder issues—because their children refuse to go to the toilet during the day for toilet stops. Therefore, they are not drinking water in the classrooms, so they are dehydrated all day. They are not peeing and they are coming home, and then we are talking about—we have behavioural issues in the classroom. Let us have a look at some of the functions the children are not able to do. Literally, P&C spend so many meetings and so much funding on toilets, and we are restricted by what we can and cannot do because they are inside buildings. The hours discussed around toilets—it would be astounding if people knew how much we talk about toilets. This is a basic, fundamental right.

The CHAIR: What is an example of that? Is the problem privacy or stench? Is it unclean? Is it all of the above?

YVONNE HILSZ: We have photos. There are doors unhinged. You have vandalism left, right and centre. For the primary school children, there are spiders; I appreciate that we are in Australia, but cleaning them out would also help. Soap dispensers do not work, so they cannot wash their hands for sanitary. Lighting, stench—some of them have grout that has been there for 50 or 60 years. Grout has now changed; they can now have it so that urine does not go into the grout. But 50 years ago, whatever went onto the floors went into the grout. You have got plumbing issues. You have got security issues of doors not locking properly. You have got toilet seats being yanked off and therefore not replaced, so it limits the amount of toilets. It goes—

The CHAIR: But the high socio-economic schools that you mentioned, what is an example of that?

YVONNE HILSZ: All of those.

The CHAIR: All of them?

YVONNE HILSZ: In my area, all of those.

The CHAIR: What is your area?

YVONNE HILSZ: I am in the inner west.

ALAN GARDINER: I am in the North Shore and my local high school is currently going through a process with Asset Management and School Infrastructure to replace many of the older toilets. These are 50-year-old toilets and they have got exactly the issues that Yvonne has been mentioning. That means the entire toilet area has to be completely jackhammered out and a completely new room put in to do that. That is to get rid of the stench.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can I just make a comment that the toilet refurbishment gets caught up with the entire maintenance program for the school. Many years ago there was actually a separate program for toilets. I passionately support the evidence that is being given now. I suppose in terms of this inquiry I would like to ask the witnesses if they would support this special separate program for school toilets to be prioritised so that the school is not waiting for the mega million-dollar redevelopment in order to have this issue addressed.

YVONNE HILSZ: Yes.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes, I believe some of that is actually going on from the department. I think that local high schools have benefited from that. But, yes. We did a survey of the local P&Cs in the northern Sydney area and the top issue which came from P&Cs was toilets.

YVONNE HILSZ: Same with the inner west.

ALAN GARDINER: I think, from memory, the next issue was the whole school bus pick-up drop-off of students with the safety issues associated, tying to your earlier question.

YVONNE HILSZ: And it is the cost, even getting something changed as the taps in the bathroom. I appreciate we have to have standard of build, but if we go out to a local builder and get all of the requirements—and often it is funded by P&Cs because it is faster—it is a quarter of what the bill would be when it comes through from Assets, never mind that it then takes 12 months with Assets in some cases that I have been involved in. We can get that fixed within three to four weeks and get all the safety protocol, but it is the cost that is prohibitive as well.

A P&C go, "We can find that \$5,000 to replace the taps today. That's a sausage sizzle." But then when we get an actual builder, if it is going to cost \$15,000 to \$20,000 and that is part of the school's budget, you think, "What's changed between \$5,000 and \$20,000 for six taps to be replaced when we can get it done"—again, following protocol—"in, say, three to four weeks usually by a local parent who wants to contribute back to the community?" Otherwise we go in the queue with Assets and it can take 12 months and a huge amount of project management from a principal, who ideally we would prefer to be focusing on the education of our children instead of six toilet taps.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: So what is the system, then, to be able to get more of that happening, where you have got the six toilet taps and that work being undertaken by local communities rather than being taken through the whole assets process? What is the incentive mechanism?

ALAN GARDINER: I have a couple of comments. Firstly, things like that should not have to be funded by P&C fundraising. That should be a departmental cost in the first place. But, that issue aside, the department has been very hard edged over the last few years that everything has to go through standard departmental processes, which means minor maintenance has to go through their master contracts and that has got associated bureaucratic overhead and cost. Any building works has to go through the government tendering system, which used to not be the case and imposes not just time delay but extra costs. There is definitely a premium which is being paid by the Government for going through that process with pre-qualified tenderers.

YVONNE HILSZ: Absolutely.

ALAN GARDINER: I understand the objective: Work done in a school has to be done to a requisite standard. But that can be done and historically was done. At the moment we are still living with the—every project of more than \$30,000 has to go through government tendering, according to School Infrastructure and Asset Management. There was a move from School Infrastructure not long after it was created saying that that was the rule for now but, as a school demonstrates that it can do small projects in compliance with the rules and effectively not causing problems, then they would have an increased limit. There has been no follow through on that.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Rather than the \$30,000, where do you think that limit should be set?

ALAN GARDINER: I do not know. I thought the concept was good. As a school demonstrates that it has the capability to reliably do projects then, yes, that could be progressively upped.

YVONNE HILSZ: I think it depends on what the project is. But for something like changing taps in a bathroom, it is different to, say, putting on a new basketball roof. I understand that there are implications if—

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Safety implications.

YVONNE HILSZ: Yes, 100 per cent. But there is definitely a lot of red tape that slows down some of the smaller projects that are actually urgent, like children being able to go to the bathroom safely, with proper lighting, a toilet that flushes and to wash their hands. I do not think that should have a six- to 12-month wait when we actually have facilities and funding often to go, "We can fix that."

ALAN GARDINER: I think on the toilet area I would refer you to the submission from Concord High School P&C, which has some very good descriptions and a few photographs.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: We went to Concord High School

ALAN GARDINER: You did. Excellent.

YVONNE HILSZ: And that is not actually that unusual. I know the commentary was quite detailed but it does not take many schools for you to actually see that you would ask yourself, "Would I go to this toilet?" It is an *Erin Brockovich* piece of "Would you have the glass of water?" Regardless of if you are a parent or not, if you had a choice, you would not want to go to many of these toilets. I think that is a real tragedy for our children. They are sitting there dehydrated or busting to go to the bathroom or nervous to go to the bathroom. You have got to think about whether they are actually learning or whether they are sitting there distracted. There is a compounding impact to their health that is mental, physical and emotional—the list goes on—for something as basic as going to the bathroom.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: We have spent a lot of time, of course, looking at the needs of schools in growth areas. Over the last six years capital investment in education has increased sevenfold. A lot of the issues you are talking about are not the big headline new schools but new toilet facilities, the need for covered basketball courts or covered outdoor areas in already established developed areas. Do you see that there is a certain challenge at the moment in School Infrastructure where some of these projects are potentially missing out because we are maybe too focused on the new schools?

ALAN GARDINER: Yes. I understand the need to build new schools and new classrooms in growth areas but, yes, that means there is certainly still plenty of work in existing schools, many of which are very old. Fortunately, many of those very old buildings are very structurally sound because they were built that way. But, nevertheless, there are certainly areas for upgrade. Toilets are certainly an example.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I have a general observation. When I was a councillor, with small projects the council used to have a list of preferred tenderers or people that they could immediately contact to resolve an issue. Is that something that could work with the schooling system?

ALAN GARDINER: The department already maintains a list of approved building—

YVONNE HILSZ: Vendors.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes. Organisations. That is useful but then there are also process issues around that. If, for example, we as a P&C wish to fund a project at a school, we might get some ideas or some initial planning work from one of those vendors, but under the rules that means they can no longer participate any further in the project.

YVONNE HILSZ: And there is a shortage of availability. I mean, there are labour issues currently in construction delays. With the volume of projects that are required versus the number of builders who can do it, I feel like there is a misalignment.

ALAN GARDINER: Yes. That is an issue. I understand from the departmental point of view that they do not want to be caught with a project which has gone haywire and they need to pick up the pieces. That is fair enough.

YVONNE HILSZ: We do not want that either.

ALAN GARDINER: So obviously there need to be standards and there needs to be some, at least, vetting of the organisations doing the work. So pre-approval is fine, but the process around it is still not adequate.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I just thought that could minimise the delay process, rather than taking six months or a year.

YVONNE HILSZ: But it is also a funding issue. For many of the schools they actually have to fund— and the P&Cs partially fund it. So there is then the process where they will start fundraising but then delays happen, and I understand COVID has caused a challenge on many levels. By the time they are getting closer to the actual build the cost has gone up so then P&Cs are back funding as well and then there are budget constraints coming in from the school. So it is very difficult sometimes with long time lines, and then you have got the issue where parents have already started to move out of the school who may have been more passionate for that project.

You are project managing sometimes a three- to five- year process. As a volunteer group who are a body of people who are moving through the school only because of their children, you then have the issue of if that group moves on and the project has not yet begun or halfway begun, what happens then? It is difficult, I would imagine, for the principals to also manage the project knowing that they are relying on funding coming from a group of parents who are volunteering their time to raise funds. They have to commit, we have to commit and Assets have to commit; it is a three-party approach. We do not have enough information also to really understand the process. It gets given out in bite-sized chunks.

ALAN GARDINER: I think it is reasonable for a parent involved in fundraising to expect that that fundraising in the main is going to be there for the benefit of the children while they are at the school. But there are plenty of occasions when that is simply not the case and our fundraising is effectively for the children of the parents who come after us.

YVONNE HILSZ: And it still comes to question, some of the basic things that P&Cs are funding actually should be—

ALAN GARDINER: Yes, but we cannot wait.

YVONNE HILSZ: No, we cannot wait, so it is faster for us to fundraise.

ALAN GARDINER: Because we care about our children.

YVONNE HILSZ: Yes.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I do not know if I am just more aware of it lately, but I seem to see a lot of "NSW Government has funded this" big signs on things. In fact, there is a private school near me that has a big sign when they co-funded a piece of infrastructure for the school. To your knowledge, "we will put this big sign up", is that something that gets negotiated with schools for a certain type of infrastructure improvement?

YVONNE HILSZ: I do not know.

ALAN GARDINER: As far as I know, if there is government funding, the Government will, if there is an opportunity, ensure that it is noticed by the public.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Will that extend to things like changing taps?

YVONNE HILSZ: No.

ALAN GARDINER: No.

YVONNE HILSZ: It has not in the schools that I am aware of.

ALAN GARDINER: Not that I am aware of. That is a bit too small.

YVONNE HILSZ: Yes, too small. There are a couple of big projects going on in my area and I have not yet heard of the fact that one of the requirements is that there needs to be some kind of acknowledgement that funding has come in from the Government. Sponsorship deals are happening with the P&Cs to get their money in that they will put banners up of their local business community sponsors, but I have not seen that as a request yet from the Government that part of it should be that they are displayed that they have donated money. There was a lot of funding coming out last year. I am not sure what the impact would be moving forward after the election, though.

ALAN GARDINER: What I have seen is wherever there is construction fencing around a site, that will have government signage on it.

YVONNE HILSZ: I do not know if then there is a permanent need for it to be acknowledged.

ALAN GARDINER: No, there is nothing permanent.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: No, but during the period of time. I guess if you were trying to demonstrate to the public that you were funding schools, you might be more inclined to fund the ones that you have the signs up for than the smaller ones.

ALAN GARDINER: Possibly.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: You probably cannot comment on that.

ALAN GARDINER: Again, my observation is that as soon there is a construction fence, that is just a suitable canvas to put a sign on.

The CHAIR: All that talk about toilets means the Committee will have a toilet break. [Disorder]. This is just a function of nature. We will have a five-minute break now and resume with some of your members from Lennox Head. Thanks for your time today, Yvonne and Alan. We appreciate your contribution.

YVONNE HILSZ: Thank you.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr DANNY ROSE, Manager, Roads and Stormwater, Tweed Shire Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Ms IVY YAP, Member, Lennox Head Public School Parents and Citizens Association, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Ms KERREN KERNAGHAN, Member, Lennox Head Public School Parents and Citizens Association, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: We have your submissions to the inquiry for which we thank you very much, but it is also available to you to make a short opening statement to this hearing, if you so wish.

IVY YAP: I will try to make this brief. Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee today at the hearing. I want to begin by stating that the infrastructure at Lennox Head Public School is not fit for purpose for contemporary learning and teaching. The project to improve the infrastructure began six years ago and the delivery has since been delayed with the discovery of Aboriginal artefacts on site. In December last year, the Department of Education decided that the infrastructure upgrade will not proceed at the present site and that the school will be relocated. However, the location of the new site is unknown and the funding for the new school build is still unsecured. The future use of the school site after the school's relocation also remains undisclosed.

Mr Chair, we acknowledge the ongoing efforts by the Department of Education to progress this infrastructure project but there is an expectation amongst some in our community that more should be done. Mr Chair, to assist the Committee with the points that we are about to raise, I would like to table three documents, which I hope you have in front of you. These show the importance for greater public transparency and disclosure of information, especially with project time frames. As an example, may I please refer to the document titled "Community update, April 2022". I hope that you have it in front of you.

The CHAIR: Yes, we do, thanks. It is being circulated now. It is dated April 2022.

IVY YAP: Please let me know when you are ready before I proceed further.

The CHAIR: Yes, please proceed.

IVY YAP: If you could please refer to page 2—there is a diagram. That basically illustrates the planning, approval and delivery phases of the building of the new school. However, there are no indicative time frames for each phase of the project. This document actually was released last month, informing the community about the expressions of interest to acquire land for the new school. However, time frames associated with this process in its entirety are undisclosed. What we are asking for is greater transparency of information to help us improve our understanding of the progress of this project. I hope that is one illustration there for you.

The second point that we would like to raise is that parents and community should be identified as stakeholders in this infrastructure project as it affects the education of our children and the livelihood of our community. We continue to live with decisions made regarding our only school without having the opportunity to provide substantial input to influence key decisions. May I please refer the Committee to a second document, titled *Community Update May 2022*? May I just double-check that you have that in front of you?

The CHAIR: Yes.

IVY YAP: Okay. So this was circulated last week actually to the community to advise of the rezone of Lennox Head Public School and Southern Cross Public School school area intakes. You can notice from the map—and I am not sure how clearly it is printed out in front of you—that the southern half of Lennox public school is now redesignated as the intake area for Southern Cross. The Department of Education implemented this rezone in order to stabilise the growth at Lennox Head Public School. This also gradually reduces the student population in years to come. This rezone also means that some families, carers and children living in our community who could previously walk or cycle to school will now have to commute without the advantage of a metropolitan public transport system.

We conclude our statement by reiterating that we do not know when the new school will be built. Therefore, the present and ongoing needs of the school community must not be understated or neglected. It is our understanding that past decisions, especially on infrastructure maintenance and repairs, were short term in focus because the school was to be upgraded. This short-term focus has to stop. May I please refer the Committee to the photos that we have of the school? If I could point you to the photos on the first page where there is the portable classroom cluster and the image of the air purifiers—so upon the visit to school last week, it was demonstrated to me that air purifiers are actually being used in some of the classrooms in the school right now due to mould

build-up, poor ventilation, especially in the portable classrooms, where windows cannot be opened because they want to try and minimise the noise and the level of mosquitoes coming in.

The portable classrooms in particular are very close to each other. On the second page you can see the only sheltered walkway that we have to the portable classroom cluster. It is currently inadequate, especially during heavy rain. There is also an image of the play space area that has been fenced off because of the artefacts that were discovered on site. There are also images there—I hope that you can see—of unsheltered eating areas and the staffroom, which is currently in a portable. There is not space adequately, I suppose, for the amount of staff that they have at the school. And the last image I would like to refer you to please is of our canteen and music room, which is also located in the portable itself and is a shared space. It is one of the oldest portables, I believe, on the site. The present school community of 510 children and 44 administration, teachers, teaching and support staff must have access to well-maintained and safe infrastructure, equipment and materials in order to achieve a high standard of education. This concludes our opening statement. Thank you so much for your time.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Danny, did you have an opening statement?

DANNY ROSE: Yes, I do. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee today following Tweed Shire Council's submission to the Committee. I am the Manager, Roads and Stormwater at Tweed Shire Council and I am responsible for overseeing and implementing public infrastructure provision to the Tweed community, including the impacts of major developments on those networks alongside my colleagues in our water and wastewater units. Tweed is a high-growth council and we have been critical to the State's planning strategy for the last 20 to 30 years and we will continue to do so. We have large land releases, with 15,000 lots imminent—residential lots.

In our experience this planning strategy has not equated to School Infrastructure acquiring new greenfield public school sites. Instead the plan appears to us to be to cater for this growth through upgrades and expansions of existing facilities. These existing school sites are typically constrained and located in or adjacent to residential areas and they all have their existing traffic parking servicing problems. So while council is very, very supportive of new larger public school facilities, we are often compromised when they are not required to meet the same infrastructure standards as other developments, including private schools. I have included several examples in our submission and am happy to discuss these with the Committee today.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I note we have only got a short session with you today, so can I say thanks very much for the additional information as well, Ivy and Kerren. That is really helpful. I just wanted to ask a couple of questions around the changes to the local intake areas. What was the consultation that was undertaken with the P&C before this decision was taken?

IVY YAP: We, the P&C, were invited to a special meeting the night before the rezone was announced. So we were informed of the meeting on Friday afternoon and the meeting occurred on the Monday evening, from memory.

KERREN KERNAGHAN: Yes.

IVY YAP: And Tuesday the announcement was made of the rezone.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So there was no actual, "This is the decision we are pursuing. This is something that we are considering. We would like to talk to parents and find out about what is the process that you are going through and"—

IVY YAP: No, not that I am aware of. Kerren?

KERREN KERNAGHAN: No.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So it would not really be consultation. It would be more about a briefing before a decision was announced.

IVY YAP: Yes, pretty much.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thank you very much for your photographs. They have really helped us get an understanding of the difficulties that you are facing. Can I just ask you one question before I hand over to my colleagues because we do not have a lot of time. The play space that the children have—roughly, do you consider that adequate? Has that been impacted on by the demountable classrooms?

KERREN KERNAGHAN: Absolutely. So at the moment in one of—so there are two playtimes. They actually send years 5 and 6 across to an oval which is just next door because there is not adequate space for all the kids to play in.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Wow, okay. I have quite a few other questions but I might just pass to my colleagues because we have only got about 10 minutes with these guys.

The CHAIR: Danny, Ivy and Kerren, it is open to members to put questions as supplementaries because we are trying to get through so many schools and issues in our limited time. Is that okay for you if Ms Houssos, for example, lodges those questions to you as supplementaries? Then you have 21 days to provide an answer and it provides the Committee with additional information.

DANNY ROSE: Yes.

KERREN KERNAGHAN: Yes.

IVY YAP: Yes.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Just out of curiosity, in terms of the process of the expressions of interest, do you know when the expressions of interest will go out and how long for?

IVY YAP: They were supposed to be released right about now but—

KERREN KERNAGHAN: Have not heard anything.

IVY YAP: Have not heard anything. I tried to look for the documents online. I cannot find it. I have placed a query with School Infrastructure this morning through email to find out where I can find them. I do not know, to be honest.

KERREN KERNAGHAN: No.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: When you had those briefings, did they tell you how long the expressions of interest would go for?

IVY YAP: The expressions of interest of land—we were told it should come out soonish, within coming weeks, but no specific date was offered.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: There has been significant growth of the school considering it is a small school. It started off at pretty much the same size as my kids' school is, at about 327, and, of course, it has gone to 463 in five years. That is a big impact for a school like yours on a small site like it is. I notice in terms of the pictures that you have distributed—and thank you very much for those—the play space area has been fenced off due to an artefact discovery, as you outlined. Do you want to outline what the process is there? And is that play space looking to come back into the school fold at all?

KERREN KERNAGHAN: Not at all. The artefacts that were found there, they fenced them off. That actually included the long jump pit. So now when they hold athletics, they actually have to hold it on another site because they cannot facilitate the long jump and stuff there. But whatever was there, you are now allowed to walk on it and you are not allowed to go into that area, so it is completely fenced off. If anything happens in the area—for example, there was a storm late last year and a tree fell over. That tree then had to be fenced off because they needed people to come in and check and make sure that nothing had been disturbed. So that at was more play space that the kids then cannot play in.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I take it that is an Aboriginal artefact that has been found there?

KERREN KERNAGHAN: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Does that have an impact in terms of future options for the school and for site planning as well, and, potentially, to the May 2021 advice that you provided as the location for a new school in Lennox Head?

KERREN KERNAGHAN: Yes. There is an AHIP in place but you cannot actually dig on site. There are certain things that they can do, and the Department of Education over the years did try everything and put a fair few options available. But each of them kind of got knocked back, so that is when we decided that they needed to find a new site. There are existing buildings there and they were going to go up on the existing buildings on the footprint that was already there. But, it got knocked back, so we could not do that either. There is nothing that you can do at the school. We would be a bit worried because if a pipe burst or something like that, apparently we cannot dig to fix it. It is getting to the point where it is really unusable, kind of thing.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I can understand your frustration.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Rose, thank you very much for your time and for your submission. I wanted to ask you about the information that you provide to School Infrastructure NSW. Do you engage with them directly to provide your population projections, or does that happen at a more centralised level?

DANNY ROSE: I believe it happens at the State level in terms of council participates in the planning strategies, like the Far North Coast strategy and our city centre strategies, which incorporate Tweed Heads as the major city on the North Coast. School Infrastructure, Health Infrastructure and other stakeholders were involved in those discussions. So indirectly they do receive that information with input from council, but I believe that is primarily held, sourced and researched by the State.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So, for example, there are no local building approvals information or any kind of changes that you would then feed into School Infrastructure NSW?

DANNY ROSE: We would if we were requested, but I am not aware of any requests of that nature. They may be handled by our strategic planning—I sit within the engineering area—but I understand that their planning is based on information that is provided by the State rather than council.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Rose, we have done a number of site visits, and one of the issues that has come up frequently is around traffic and congestion. I note that you talked about that in your submission as well, that even the provision of things like Kiss and Ride facilities that try to facilitate easier drop-offs can actually create much bigger traffic headaches. That is in the outer suburbs of Sydney, but some of the populations that we are looking at on the Far North Coast are similar to that. What is the kind of engagement that you have at a localised planning level with School Infrastructure NSW when it is planning a school? Does it come and talk to you about how traffic and I think the term it uses is "enabling infrastructure" are going to work? Do those conversations happen?

DANNY ROSE: They do. In our experience, as I said in my opening, we are generally dealing with retrofits and upgrades to existing schools. Often we are approached and we try to table what the existing issues around particular schools are. We have got lots of examples in Murwillumbah, in Kingscliff and in Tweed Heads South that are on foot at the moment. They are heard, but our experience is that they rarely result in many physical changes to the planning for those schools because the schools are physically constrained by site and other limitations. They do not have cultural heritage impacts that I am aware of, but other things like flora and fauna do come up. When we try to impose our standards on things like parking, traffic pick-ups and drop-offs, and public transport infrastructure, generally we get what we are given because that is all that will fit on the site or adjacent to the site. There are systems in place for upgrades external to school sites, and often their traffic assessments are based on assumed increases in children and staff walking, cycling and catching buses to schools. However, they are there for council to apply for grants to fill in these missing links or upgrade infrastructure, which shifts that resource and administration burden onto council rather than them being provided up-front with the school upgrades.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I will go back to Ms Yap and Ms Kernaghan. There are some pretty significant issues in terms of the future of the school, the way that the current site is being used and the location of this new school. How would you characterise the interactions with School Infrastructure NSW and the local school community and parents in engaging in a conversation about addressing these issues?

KERREN KERNAGHAN: I have been involved with it from the get-go, which, I think, is about six years. For the first couple of meetings, you literally had to re-explain yourself because it was different people at those meetings; you did not have a continuity of people there. In the last couple of meetings there are two blokes who have stayed with the development, even though that is not their role anymore, because they understood our frustration. People do not understand. If you have not been to the site, you cannot get a grasp of what we are actually dealing with. They half tell you what is happening. They say that there is going to be community consultation and parent consultation. Even sometimes when you put forward your ideas, they do not listen to you. At the very first meeting they kind of said that Lennox was a retirement village and, "Oh, no, families aren't living here", and look what happened, the school blew out that much. We tried to tell them that the figure that they gave us that we were going to be was literally what we were at at that point in time from the five years previous.

I feel—and I was at the school for 17 years with my children—that they did not listen to us. Even now with this new school, it is never going to happen but you literally need a public high school in Lennox Head, given the way that the population and the growth is going, not that that is going to happen. I honestly do not know where they are going to find the site to put a new school.

IVY YAP: I have not been involved with the infrastructure project for as long as Kerren has, but from the limited interaction I have had so far I think, personally, there could be more in terms of consultation with the community and with parents. Right now I believe we are recipients of information as opposed to being engaged with for an opinion and input.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Do you find that the people who you are dealing with are based locally on the Far North Coast or are they primarily from Sydney?

IVY YAP: From the meeting we had about the rezone last week, there was a representative from School Infrastructure who, I understand—if my memory serves me correctly—had relocated and is now living locally, and the representatives from the Department of Education are from this Far North Coast area. That was from the meeting last week.

KERREN KERNAGHAN: The infrastructure ones—the majority of them, besides Peter Campbell, who is our head guy here, were all from Sydney.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Obviously, that makes life a bit more difficult when trying to explain these kinds of generalisations that are made that Lennox Head is a retirement community rather than—

KERREN KERNAGHAN: In Sydney you have got the different suburbs, and you literally step across a line and you are in a different suburb. That is not what we are like. Our next town is 10 minutes away. The other town is 20 minutes away. It is not like the next school is just next door.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Absolutely. Thank you for your time and for highlighting the huge issues that you are facing. It has certainly been very informative for us as a Committee today. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Catherine Cusack, did you have any points? Catherine is a North Coast MLC. You live in Lennox Head. What is the scene there?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I will go and visit the school and engage on this. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Any other questions? If not, it is right on time for this session. Thanks, Danny, Ivy and Kerren, for your input, which has been fantastic. By the sound of it, Catherine will be our agent on the ground to gather more information with a visit to the school. It is obviously very hard to visit every region of the State with our limited resources, but we thank you for your participation today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr KEVIN BARTOLO, Founder, Ulladulla Area Schools Expansion Action Group, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Ms MELANIE DOYLE, Member, Ulladulla High School Parents and Citizens Executive Committee, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Kevin or Melanie, it is available to you to make a short opening statement. We have your submissions. Thank you for those. If you want to make a short opening statement, you can do so, or we can go straight to questions.

MELANIE DOYLE: In regards to this, I heard that there was a recommendation possibility and then an address. I will stick with the recommendation because I think the address will be just over two minutes. Basically, our recommendation would be for School Infrastructure NSW to seek opportunities for underutilised assets—in our case, we have got an underutilised school or vacant school—and to create cost-effective educational facilities and ensure that funding is allocated proportionally and equitably. We have just found a recent scenario where, locally, \$40 million of funding has been allocated to the benefit of 40 students, which is fantastic. However, we were seeking—I am not sure if you know the background of our scenario. We were seeking \$10 million to \$15 million to basically utilise this existing working school, which is fit for purpose—so a lot less—and it would have been to the benefit of 500 local students. I suppose that is our concern with our recent experience with School Infrastructure NSW.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Kevin?

KEVIN BARTOLO: Just to add to that, basically, the community, especially the members of the group that I represent, are a little bit annoyed with the process that we were cut out of and the lack of wanting to talk with the community at meetings that we had invited members of the education department and local members of Parliament to. We just needed to see that they were willing to work with us on this situation. Unfortunately, every avenue that we tried to take up with that was declined. It is a bit sad that is what happened.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thanks very much, Kevin and Mel, for your time today. It might be useful for the Committee if you explain a bit more about the details of the broader issue. We have seen two new schools, one a bit further south—and we have already talked about the South Nowra/Worrigee school this morning and the concerns about that being promised and not necessarily needed. At the same time, around Milton and Ulladulla, we have got a site where we need to see the school progress, but it is not progressing. Is that right?

MELANIE DOYLE: Yes, I think the biggest concern we have is that School Infrastructure basically is not looking at current statistics of growth in this area. As we all know, especially post-COVID, there has been a large push regionally. This is exacerbated by already over capacity schools. Our local primary schools are over capacity by 30 per cent, our high school is over capacity by about 10 per cent and it is getting worse. We have only got one high school, which reaches basically from Nowra all the way to Batemans Bay, so it is a large span. We are a very popular, growing area. We have got this great opportunity where the Anglican school was purchased by the New South Wales State Government for the cheap price of \$4 million—an absolute bargain. It facilitated 500 students, K-12, and is an absolutely fantastic private school facility.

We were hoping, when that was purchased, as a community, that we would look at it as an education precinct and how that would benefit all three schools that are over capacity and even be open-minded to other opportunities at an educational level. However, that consultation to discuss all the options did not take place. Instead, they have moved forward and demolished a component of that school to make way for the 40 students at Budawang. The remainder of the school remains fit for purpose but has been sitting there for the past three years wasting away. It is actually getting quite depleted now. It is sad to see. The Government has this fantastic facility at its disposal, but it is not really consulting with the community on how that facility can be utilised.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Kevin, did you want to add to that?

KEVIN BARTOLO: The great concern that we have—and it was also raised by Transport for NSW when they were going through the approval of Budawang School—is that the rest of the site is not being consulted on or looked at in this whole site as a proposal. Later on, if the school goes ahead, there is going to be a great possibility that there is not going to be enough access for buses, parents and emergency vehicles to access the rear of the site, where the majority of the students are going to be. Transport for NSW has already stated that there is not enough room on the existing [inaudible] drive part of the road due to the residential area around it and commercial properties. It only housed one to two buses as it is. If you have got about 500 students, you could be looking at five or more buses at any one time, plus a high number of parents that come and pick their kids up and drop them off.

MELANIE DOYLE: And that is why we wanted a holistic approach by School Infrastructure NSW. When we were granted that \$4 million property, there was an opportunity to look at how we can benefit the community as a whole, not just take away a small component of that land. The reason they moved those students across there is because they were leasing another premises that they wanted to get out of, so that was their immediate concern. So I understand that. That was the move they chose to make to get out of that lease. But in the process they have effectively let the majority of the site go derelict and not be made available to the wider community, when it is quite clear that this is a growing need for this space.

KEVIN BARTOLO: Just one other thing on that, it was not the only site that was available for the use of making a new school for Budawang. There is a site on Garside Road that the Department of Education tried to sell off only last year, and the local community fought for that. That site would actually house basically two of the new Budawang schools that they are actually putting onto the SAS site. So it would allow for 100 per cent expansion of the new school that they are building, which we have been told by Budawang will be at 100 per cent capacity the day that they open. They do not even know how many people are waiting. There is no waiting list for it because they do not even bother because they have not got a premises that would house enough of the students that need to go to that school.

MELANIE DOYLE: There have been a number of ideas thrown around in the community, some of them being that the amount of support classes that we are seeing in the local primary schools and high school have expanded. So the high school has got 12 and the primary schools have two or three each. Some of the children in those support classes are quite handicapped because they have had no other avenue or places to go and some of them have severe learning disabilities. So what we are suggesting—and I am not suggesting this as an option—there are so many different needs that we could utilise that space for which would alleviate pressure on the local schools. We are just not getting a hearing from School Infrastructure NSW.

I know we are a little bit different, because in most circumstances when people are approaching them they are looking for a brand-new field or a major renovation. In this case we have a perfectly good walk-in school right now. Put your pencil on the table and get going. We just need a fit-out. Less than \$10 million, they said it was going to cost them, but instead \$40 million has been directed to this new school and nothing to the greater community. We just feel that School Infrastructure NSW is under-utilising its assets, and its disproportionately allocated fund is not equitable in our community.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: What about the impact on students who are attending the existing primary school and high school? One of your submissions talked about how they are being really crammed in, that they do not have enough play space, that they do not have enough space to move around. Can you just talk about the impact on the students?

KEVIN BARTOLO: Well, I—

MELANIE DOYLE: [Disorder]. Sorry, you speak, Kev.

KEVIN BARTOLO: I was basically going to say the numbers say a lot. In 2017 the Ulladulla High School was at 1,208 students, and its maximum capacity set by the DoE is 1,220. Ulladulla Primary School, the same year, 735 students, where the maximum capacity was 509. Milton Public School, 681 students with a 555 capacity set by the DoE. That was in 2017. The numbers have only increased since then.

MELANIE DOYLE: I think the biggest thing with the lack of space is—with the high school, for example, when year 7s start, they are allocated a very small area. There is not enough seating and they have to sit on the concrete, and there is a very limited area they can play in an asphalt area. I know rural schools are better off than a lot of the city schools because of the space factor, so we are lucky in some regards that we have ovals. But we do not have the normal-sized ovals and space that used to be available to students because we are constantly having to put demountables on. I think we are up to 20 demountables, and I know other schools are also in the same situation. But what annoys us the most is there is a perfectly good school sitting there waiting to be utilised, and that is our argument. I understand that there is no funding and there is nothing there in the first place, but we have a school available to us. Why are we not using it?

KEVIN BARTOLO: You mentioned Worrigeer before. Worrigeer has less of a population growth than the Ulladulla-Milton area has. It was in the latest statistics.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You talked about how the planning projections from School Infrastructure and from Planning have just been so wrong, that it is a massive area of growth, that corridor around Milton-Ulladulla. I know that this is an issue that has been raised with me by our colleague Justin Field. I know that it is something that he is right across, that the official government planning is just not reflecting what is going on on the ground. Is that correct?

MELANIE DOYLE: One hundred per cent. If you look at their planning statistics, they have basically got negative to flat growth in our area for schools. I do not think you have to be a rocket scientist to work out that by face value that is incorrect. You will probably find other schools across the State with exactly the same fate. They cannot run their statistics off the census information from five years ago. They have to work out—we have about 10 housing developments going through at the moment. Real estate, like anywhere, is going through the roof. There are so many new faces and families in town. I have been here for over 20 years and I do not know half the people in the streets anymore. It is a completely dynamic, diverse, young group of people that are coming into town now. It is not the old, retirement [inaudible] that it traditionally has. Our projected forecasts supplied by School Infrastructure are way out of kilter with reality.

The CHAIR: Are there other questions from the Committee members? The Hon. Catherine Cusack, do you have any questions? If not, we have to conclude at that point and thank the representatives from Ulladulla.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Sorry, Chair. I apologise, I was just away from the mute button. I do not have any questions.

The CHAIR: That is okay. The webex can be a bit confusing. Thank you to Melanie and Kevin for your presentation. Any further information you want to provide to the Committee will be gratefully received.

KEVIN BARTOLO: We are happy to take supplementary questions if that comes about.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms KATIE FERGUSON, P&C President, Gillieston Primary School, affirmed and examined

Mr TODD SELLERS, Parent, Gillieston Primary School, sworn and examined

Mr SIMON ROLFE, Parent, Gillieston Primary School, affirmed and examined

Ms SARAH BIRD, Parent, Gillieston Primary School, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you very much Katie, Todd and Simon for coming in and Sarah, who is online. It is available to you to make a short statement if any of you wanted to and then we will ask questions as Committee members.

KATIE FERGUSON: My name is Katie, P&C president and mother of three children at Gillieston public. I have two daughters and a son at the school—year 6, year 4 and kindergarten. My son lives to play soccer. It is everything to him. He persists at school every single day chasing the ball up and down the steep hill that they call an oval or twisting his ankle on the unlevel playing field. This is not good enough. I have been talking with the community for some time now and in that time I have had countless parents tell me they would rather be in debt due to private school fees than send their children to Gillieston. This is not good enough. I recently met with a mother who actually wanted to send her daughter to Gillieston but, as her daughter has a hearing disability, the acoustics in the demountable classrooms are too much for her to bear. She is now sending her daughter to a Catholic school over 20 kilometres away because she could not get an out-of-zone placement at a more local out-of-zone school. This is not good enough.

Just this week I had a concerned mother message me. Her daughter has cerebral palsy and she desperately wants her daughter to go to the same school as her neighbours. After having a test run with a physio and OT, they found the stairs to the demountable hall/canteen to be far too steep and the playing areas to be far too unlevel. This is not good enough. On Friday I attended a Mother's Day morning tea, our first since COVID. On the tour to my children's classrooms, I passed one of the three demountable toilets. The smell was real. I now understand why my daughter and so many of her school friends wait until they get home to use the facilities, causing health problems. This is not good enough. I dream of the day my children can put on a school performance, but with a school hall with no stage that can barely fit half the school in it, let alone the parents and carers, this is not going to happen. This is not good enough. I could keep talking but it is time to sign the cheque. We have been left behind for far too long. Give us the school our children deserve. Thank you.

TODD SELLERS: Thank you for the opportunity, folks, and thank you, Chair. My name is Todd Sellers. I am a resident of Gillieston Heights—Maitland born and bred. I have been in Gillieston Heights for 20 years. I have seven children, six of whom either attend or have attended Gillieston Public School. I have been associated with the school for 20 years. My eldest daughter was a school captain there—very proud. Two sons have been house captains—very proud. One of my sons unfortunately cannot attend. He suffers from, or has a condition referred to as, autism, which you may be familiar with. He is level 3—non-verbal, there is a global development delay and a bunch of other things going on. I cannot send him to the school, even though his brothers and sisters have attended or are attending. He is nine years old. He attends Aspect. I pay \$25,000 a year for that. This school has 12 classrooms, 10 of which are demountables. I have some documents I would like to table. Is now the right time for that?

The CHAIR: Yes, sure.

TODD SELLERS: There are four documents. I have just labelled them TS, my initials, 1, 2, 3 and 4. As you receive these documents, you will see that number one is simply a letter of support from our mayor, Philip Penfold. He was elected just recently but he has been quite a strong advocate for the school for some time.

The CHAIR: Is that Cessnock or Maitland council?

TODD SELLERS: Maitland—Paterson electorate. The letter is well written and very poignant in regards to four key points. The next submission you will see is actually two maps and they will give you a very good understanding of exactly what we are talking about for the school in regards to geography. You will see in yellow on the second one is the original Gillieston Heights. This is Gillo as it was—we call it Gillo colloquially as a suburb—20 years ago. It was a small little area. I came back from Sydney. I had been in Sydney for 10 years and I wanted to find a local area, back in my home town, where we had that country feel but had all the facilities of the city. This is five minutes from Maitland, a very significant city in residential New South Wales. Country aspect—it had 64 children at this school when my children first started attending there in 2001. My three children made up the extras they needed for the next teacher to arrive. It was very exciting. We got a demountable not long after that. That was very exciting back then too. Today we actually hold our breath when we get a demountable

because it is so cluttered. But you will see on that map, about 80 per cent of the residential area there highlighted is now new areas.

The growth has been exponential. We are talking about Gillieston Heights, the fastest growing—hold me wrong if I am wrong but I do not believe I am—suburb of Maitland, which is the fastest growing city in New South Wales. And here we are with this school, one of four primary schools in the area, with demountables—10 out of 12. If you turn to page 3, you will see on that map that there are 12 highlighted buildings. If you are looking at page 3, you will see 10 of those are highlighted in yellow and you will see that there are two that are highlighted in orange. The two highlighted in orange are the permanent buildings. They are the kindergarten rooms. They were built about five years ago. All those yellow ones are all our demountables throughout the school. They are the 12 classrooms that we have.

If you turn to the last page, which is submission 4, you will see there are three photos. The top one is Maitland Public School, a very proud public school of New South Wales. My father attended there; so did my brother. Then we have Rutherford Public School. It is one that drew a lot of attention about 10 years ago and the State Government did the right thing. They put a heck of a lot of attention to it. They threw the funds and developed that school. It is state of the art. It is a fantastic development. At the bottom you will see Gillo. It was 1858 when this school was established, folks. It is not a new school. It does not have town sewerage. It does not have fencing that is safe. It is chicken wire fencing to your waist. Every other school in the area has black bars 1,800 or 2,100 high. This school does not.

I have taken up more than I should in time. I do impress upon you to have a look at those documents I submitted and I do impress upon you to understand that we see as a crisis in education the infrastructure at this school. My family, believe it or not, although we have been here since first settlement, is also multicultural. My children are German, Irish, English, Welsh, Chinese, Filipino and Spanish—our heritage. We are Australians. My wife came from a Third World country and she is in despair at the quality of our education system by way of the infrastructure at this school. She wants us to move our children. Thank you.

SIMON ROLFE: I have got three children at the school. I do not know where to start. Todd covered so many things. I have never seen a school like it. I had to stop a child jumping the fence in front of traffic the other week. It was terrible. Sorry.

The CHAIR: That is okay, Simon. It sounds a desperately bad situation. Sarah?

SARAH BIRD: I think most points have been covered, but the problems that we feel really need to be addressed are the fencing and the demountable buildings that are ever increasing and bearing the increasing population. There is a lot of land that has been subdivided to build on. The sewerage—there are houses across the road. I do not understand why the school cannot be connected. It cannot be that hard. The traffic—the approach to the school is horrendous. The main gate is on a dead-end street, so all the traffic that goes in has to come out. It is a narrow street that becomes a single lane, and it is just chaos. It is really unsafe for the children.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Our Committee has had limited time and resources for visiting schools. We have visited schools in north-west Sydney and south-west Sydney. We saw one at Schofields which sounds like a similar but far more successful situation than your Gillieston school. When a country school is overwhelmed by new, urban-type population growth it is obviously very hard to adapt, but the department at Schofields has done a pretty good job there. But your situation sounds particularly appalling. I am in Newcastle on the first couple of days of June. I will undertake to come and visit your school, as Chair of the Committee, because obviously seeing these things is a lot more authentic and informative, notwithstanding your excellent evidence.

You have alerted us to something that sounds like it just should not be happening in a civilised society. It should not be happening in a State with plenty of resources like New South Wales. It is really important for Committee members to see these things. Earlier on Catherine Cusack said she would undertake to visit Lennox Head, because she is on the North Coast of New South Wales. I will visit, and what you are saying today will be supplemented by a practical inspection—by me, at least. We need to get to the bottom of why you have been so badly overlooked. No sewerage, a chicken-wire fence and 10 demountables out of 12 classrooms is simply unacceptable.

TODD SELLERS: Mark, I might just say, that is just three points out of about eight or 10 which I could put at a similar level. They are just the primary ones. That is the key essence that we want to put you.

The CHAIR: Right, and it sounds like it is going to get worse with further population growth.

KATIE FERGUSON: It absolutely is.

TODD SELLERS: There are 300 students. There are approximately 555 students in the area that are primary-school aged, and nearly half of them attend other schools. They just will not send their kids there.

The CHAIR: Thanks for being here today. I will come and inspect the school early in June. We are now open to questions from other Committee members.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thanks very much. I thank all of our witnesses for your time today, for your submissions and for your ongoing advocacy. I have been briefed extensively by our local Labor MP, Jenny Aitchison, who I know has worked closely with you to get some improvements to the school, but there is still a very long way to go. We really appreciate you coming here and sharing your stories, as difficult as they can be. It is incredibly important for the work of this Committee that we can be informed by them.

All of you have alluded to the fact that there is overcrowding at the school. The fact that the demountables, whilst maybe first welcomed because there was an expansion of the school, and that is a good indicator—we are seeing huge housing developments around the area. Everyone has talked about that this morning. People are moving here for new opportunities for their families, looking to put down roots and looking to the local school to really be the centrepiece for that. What is the impact on children, in terms of their learning and their development, of attending at Gillieston Heights at the moment, as it currently is?

KATIE FERGUSON: As a mum of very active children—my son plays rep soccer in the Maitland area. You cannot get a ball away from this kid's feet. To have to kick that ball up the hill—his fitness is incredible. He runs up and down that hill all day. But just a flat playing surface, actual places for the kids to train for their PSSA—they have currently just started their PSSA. My son stepped up into the PSSA soccer team. They won 10-1; like I said, their fitness was amazing. My daughter played netball on Friday. They won 22-nil. For kids that have a lack of training facilities, they are very resilient children.

As for inside the classroom, I cannot speak highly enough of the teachers and staff at the school. They work really, really hard. In saying that, we do have a very hard time holding onto teachers. They will move on. They come to the school because it is a job and it is a pay cheque, but after a certain period of time they will start applying for other schools with other opportunities. Gillieston does not get the opportunities. We have only just started sending out kids to the PSSAs. My eldest daughter is in year 6, and we have maybe had one or two in that whole time, which is devastating. My kids have never done a talent show or put on a play—nothing like that.

TODD SELLERS: There are no facilities for it.

KATIE FERGUSON: We do not have the facilities.

The CHAIR: Is there any word from the education department or the principal about new, permanent buildings in the pipeline?

KATIE FERGUSON: None.

TODD SELLERS: We have asked. I have actually rung the relevant Minister's office myself several times, and I have tried to keep this as nonpartisan as I can. I have attended different forums on this, and I have invited people from Liberal and Labor, and Independents, for the purpose of keeping this as nonpartisan as I can. But, for the life of me, I cannot get a response from the current Minister. I do not give a damn what colour she is by way of electoral party. I cannot get a current response from the current Minister, and I cannot get a response from the actual department.

The CHAIR: Right, so nothing has come to you. Katie?

KATIE FERGUSON: I have had a response from Minister Mitchell's people. The only positive I got out of that letter was that they were going to look into connecting to the town septic.

The CHAIR: To the sewerage? Right.

KATIE FERGUSON: That was it. And, sorry, they had put down a new surface under our COLA. They basically painted the concrete, and I was meant to give them a high five for that. That is unacceptable. That is all we got in the Christmas break.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You had to fight to get—was it the toilets that were not concreted? That was the first battle.

KATIE FERGUSON: That was a little bit before my time coming in. The previous P&C did that. But, yes, we did have a brick building that had an unsealed floor. Now it has been replaced with three demountables. I can go to a music festival and go to the toilet in better conditions than my children do. It is outrageous.

TODD SELLERS: Let me just answer your question succinctly, if I could.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Yes, of course.

TODD SELLERS: The educational impacts currently—the attrition that Katie just spoke about is the key point. For my children it is not unusual, from year to year, to have three or more teachers. It is challenging, and I feel for the teachers. They do give quality education, but it is not an environment for them to see a career. Quite often you have teachers stay at a school for generations almost, where children will come from the children who went before. There are very few here. The teachers just do not hang around. We have children there whose parents and grandparents have attended previously, and that is part of the reason why we still have such a cohort of students there—that, and the increase in the residential area. But the educational impact from the attrition of teachers is my main concern.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: The Government is not keeping the facilities up to a standard that is going to—

TODD SELLERS: There are no standards.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: The community is keeping up their end of the bargain. The teachers are doing their best. But the facilities themselves are just absolutely appalling.

TODD SELLERS: It is a let-down.

KATIE FERGUSON: I have friends who have their kids at Rutherford. They recently moved from Gillieston to Rutherford, and she is absolutely astounded with the amount of things that they get over there that their kids did not get at Gillieston. She said to me the other day that they were getting music lessons with actual instruments. We do not have that. We once had a van that came in the afternoon. They could go into the van and play an instrument or two, but I do believe that was at payment. We had to pay for that.

TODD SELLERS: Just to paint a picture of this, a lot of schools have a hall. What we have is three or four demountables joined together, and you can fit approximately half the school in there at one time.

KATIE FERGUSON: And the canteen is connected to it.

TODD SELLERS: The canteen is at one end. There is no air conditioning or window for the canteen, so you can imagine those poor ladies in there, volunteering their time. It is a hot environment at times when they are doing things. It is very uncomfortable. The children line up. It is supposed to be a hall. They have to do two sessions for anything because they cannot fit the students in.

KATIE FERGUSON: Sorry. They have put an air conditioner in the canteen, but there is no air conditioning in the hall at all. So on a 45-degree day when they are doing an assembly, it is no longer in the hall. It is out in the COLA.

TODD SELLERS: The COLA is a covered area with a concrete floor outside.

The CHAIR: Do you have any estimate on how many local families are going out of area to get away from this?

TODD SELLERS: Approximately half.

The CHAIR: You reckon half are going up to Rutherford Public and Maitland schools?

KATIE FERGUSON: Yes.

TODD SELLERS: We know that from statistics in regards to children that attend. The statistics that I have been given are that in the area of Gillieston Heights and Cliftleigh, that intake area around Gillieston Public School, there is approximately—actually, I have the numbers written down. Bear with me for one moment.

The CHAIR: It is 50 per cent and rising.

KATIE FERGUSON: The amount of clearing that they are doing currently—and some of it being on old mine subsidence. I live in old Gillieston myself, which is in that yellow field—the original. As you look down our hill—my house is 110 years old and it is an original miner's cottage. It used to overlook where they worked. You could see the mine. They have pumped it so they can clear it and put houses on it. Over near the baseball field it is an even bigger area. I believe there could be thousands of houses over there. It is huge.

TODD SELLERS: There are 570 students in the Gillieston Heights-Cliftleigh area that are of primary school age. That is 570. We have approximately 300.

KATIE FERGUSON: We have 294.

TODD SELLERS: There are 294 that attend Gillieston Public School.

KATIE FERGUSON: As of last week.

TODD SELLERS: You can see from those statistics that approximately half attend the school. Half the parents therefore send their children elsewhere.

KATIE FERGUSON: You will find that at the beginning of every year the start of term 1 will have quite a high number of enrolments. But as you get into week one or two those numbers will dramatically drop because those parents will double enrol their children using Gillieston as their last stop and they will all send their kids elsewhere.

The CHAIR: How long has the new estate's population growth been known about?

TODD SELLERS: In 2001 when I moved there, as I said, there were 64 children in the school. I can tell you that from 2014 and 2015 through to now there has been a 76 per cent increase in the students.

The CHAIR: When you moved there in 2000 were there real estate signs around or—

TODD SELLERS: You could not buy a house. There were no new developments.

The CHAIR: When did you first find out that this area was slated for residential development?

TODD SELLERS: In 2006-ish.

The CHAIR: These issues have been known for over 15 years.

TODD SELLERS: Yes.

KATIE FERGUSON: Definitely.

TODD SELLERS: We were excited to push our house prices up. We thought that would be great. But we also assumed that the school would keep pace.

The CHAIR: It would be frustrating for you, I am sure. It is terrible.

The Hon. WES FANG: I am just looking from the top down and Northview Street is a new road—

KATIE FERGUSON: Subdevelopment.

TODD SELLERS: It is a residential road that is quite narrow as well, just to point that out.

The Hon. WES FANG: I am just looking at the aerial view. Northview Street is a new road that has been built to the south of the school. With the boundaries of the school beforehand, did the road impact the school boundary at all or was it built on land that was outside of the boundary?

TODD SELLERS: No, it did not. The land that the street was built on was other land outside of the school boundary. The school boundary remained the same, except we purchased a portion of land next to us. I guess it would be to the east of the school, which you can see on the map.

KATIE FERGUSON: I am not sure if we hold that area, Mr Sellers.

TODD SELLERS: It is the sloping football field that I am talking about and the playground.

KATIE FERGUSON: Oh, yes.

TODD SELLERS: It is approximately a 1.5-metre drop across it for the children to play on. That is the main sloping field that we are talking about. That is the only area they have to play and kick a ball.

The Hon. WES FANG: On the eastern side it comes to a point near a small water feature. Is that the ground where the school—

TODD SELLERS: True. Just to point out also, they actually changed the entrance and the entry facilities for the school. On the opposite corner, if I was to phrase it as the north-west corner, there is the original building. It is a lovely building and it is the original one with the original school bell from 1858 and the like. Unfortunately—in my view—they changed the school entrance to the other end. The road traffic plan there is non-existent. There are no pedestrian crossings, there is no support for children getting across the roads, there is nowhere for the buses to park and there is nowhere for the parents to turn their vehicles on Northview Street.

You will see if you were there of a morning or there with a camera parents doing three-point turns all up and down there in a very narrow residential street. Folks, when you have got a car parked each side up on the gutter, you have just enough room for one car to come down the centre. Cars are banked up at one end whilst other cars come through and the reverse happens, continually, at drop-off and pick-up. It is very dangerous. If this Committee is not successful in dealing with this, someone is going to get hurt.

KATIE FERGUSON: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: I think, more importantly, the department and the Minister have to deal with it. We are obviously going to be very sympathetic, and your situation sounds dreadful.

TODD SELLERS: You are right, Mr Latham. I appreciate any assistance your Committee can give.

The CHAIR: If we could fix it obviously we would, but we are here to make recommendations to the Government. Finding out about your circumstance is obviously going to be a very important part of our report.

TODD SELLERS: We are quite passionate about this. The risk in our mind is quite high, not only for the ongoing health of our children but also for the immediate safety of our children with the traffic situation.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Can I just say, Chair, that I am appalled with what we have just heard by listening to your case on the status of the school and the plea that you have been putting out there with very little response. I am not part of this Committee but hopefully I will be speaking on it and stressing the point that this is unacceptable and cannot go on.

KATIE FERGUSON: Mr Latham, I do have some photographs that I have provided today. I would like to table them. You will find a picture of one of the newer toilet demountables.

TODD SELLERS: That is a demountable toilet, folks. There are three of them.

KATIE FERGUSON: There are a couple of photos also of the slope that the children have to play on. You will see how many pillars are underneath the canteen to keep that level and you will see exactly how unlevel the playing field is. The corner of Northview Street and Ryans Road—and just obviously all the demountables. The photo with the fence is actually the point where the truck comes to pump the septic, which the children smell when that happens. It is not on. Also, I was recently given this attachment for Millthorpe Public School from a parent. She was concerned that this school had not long been upgraded and now it is getting another one.

The CHAIR: How far away is Millthorpe?

KATIE FERGUSON: It is out between Orange and—

TODD SELLERS: It is western New South Wales.

KATIE FERGUSON: Yes, western New South Wales.

The CHAIR: A long way from you. Okay.

KATIE FERGUSON: Also, I just happened to be doing some Googling and came across this lovely piece of paper here, which is the BGAS for non-government schools for 2020 and 2021 projects. There is a massive list of schools that the Government is funding, be it Catholic or private, and how much they are giving them. If you turn to the very last page of that you will find that it says, "AIS, Gillieston Heights learning community, Gillieston Heights." On first sight I got very excited because I did not realise that AIS meant that it was private. Then I saw that they gave somebody else \$5 million to build another school that is not publicly funded. It breaks my heart. I am a cleaner; I cannot afford to pay thousands and thousands of dollars a year for my children to go to school. We should all have the same opportunity.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Absolutely.

KATIE FERGUSON: I just do not understand. Apparently, I am told, the department had a deposit on land in Gillieston to move the school to a flatter surface area and build a new school, but they let that deposit lapse and it was quickly picked up by the Catholic diocese. We missed out on a new school because of their lacking, again.

TODD SELLERS: I have two statistics, if I may, that may be of assistance to you. There was approximately \$58,000 in capital spent at the school in the last period—actually, I do not have the time line this was for. Do you know, Katie?

KATIE FERGUSON: The last eight years.

TODD SELLERS: In the last eight years, \$58,000 in capital was spent. There was \$705,000 spent in repairs and maintenance for Gillieston Public School.

KATIE FERGUSON: It does not even pay our mower man. We only get a mower man once a week and we share it with four other schools.

TODD SELLERS: At the end of the day, if I may be so bold, a suggestion could be that you could reasonably build a school with fantastic facilities exactly where it is now in a structured, progressive period of

time that would be absolutely suitable and a good outcome for this community. It does not need to be moved. We do not need to do anything significant in regards to changing what is there, other than just building the specific facilities that are required. The children can still attend their school. We can move things around to achieve this. For the lower field that we were talking about with the playing field, you could actually build the school there and then make the upper field with all the demountables the playing area, for example. The facilities are there, the land is there and the community is there; we just need to put the infrastructure in.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Apologies that I was not able to hear your opening statement. From what I can gather, it is an appalling state of affairs. I wonder whether you could tell us what the principal is saying about their interactions with the department to try to remedy the situation at Gillieston Public.

KATIE FERGUSON: There is not a lot she can say, to tell you the truth. I actually brought it up at the most recent P&C meeting about them actually apparently coming to look at our septic. She knows nothing about it and I received that letter in January. The department has not even come to her to say that they are going to come and look at the septic. I have been working alongside Jenny Aitchison quite a lot, doing some community meetings, currently doing a petition—things like that. Every time I mention it, I kind of get that they are not allowed to talk about it because it is politics, so they are not allowed to sway either way and they have to stay impartial. I try not to bring up a lot because I know I am not really going to get an answer.

TODD SELLERS: She is very professional in her replies—

KATIE FERGUSON: Yes, absolutely.

TODD SELLERS: —but she is non-partisan and simple in her answers for purpose.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Is she able to communicate any of the explanations that are provided by School Infrastructure in relation to—

KATIE FERGUSON: I am not sure what she is allowed to—

TODD SELLERS: We get the impression that she is pretty much in the same boat as us by way of feedback, and she is one of a number of principals we have had in succession there as well, mind you, but she is quite a capable principal. We hope we can hang onto this one.

The CHAIR: Sarah, did you have anything extra to add there on Webex? We do not want to leave you out.

SARAH BIRD: That is okay. I think that Katie and Todd have covered most of the points that we really wanted to bring to your attention.

The Hon. WES FANG: The schools that are planned for the area—we know there are a number of private schools that will be opening at some point in the future. Do you know when that might be and what they are expecting their enrolment numbers might be?

KATIE FERGUSON: Personally, I have no idea. I went to enrol my daughter into basketball on Friday, and while I was in Service NSW to get her Active Kids voucher, I typed in Gillieston and it came up with "Gillieston Heights Adventist School". That is the first time I had ever heard about it.

TODD SELLERS: It is news to us.

KATIE FERGUSON: Absolutely news to us.

TODD SELLERS: This is very recent. This was like this week, last week?

KATIE FERGUSON: Friday is when I found it.

TODD SELLERS: There you go. There have been no announcements around anything we have seen.

KATIE FERGUSON: There has been some construction at the local Adventist church, which formally was called Gillieston Community Centre, but it was church-owned and -run. They are starting to pull it down now, so they must be starting construction now. But, sorry, I have no numbers to give you on what their enrolment would be.

TODD SELLERS: We just found out about this from Katie this morning.

The Hon. WES FANG: And the Catholic diocese, are they planning a school there as well?

TODD SELLERS: They have one in Maitland. It is a very active school. We do not have school numbers on it but a lot of people do send their children there for purpose.

KATIE FERGUSON: You will find in Wallace Creek, which is one of the new subdivisions, that there is a big block that they have left. Originally there was a big sign to say that it was going to be a brand new school. It never alluded to the fact if it was public or private. They have put a Catholic-run early childhood centre at the front of it and the back is all empty. I am presuming they are going to attach on a school.

The CHAIR: New schools are welcome—

KATIE FERGUSON: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: —but the problem is, your school is substandard and that is the thing that the Government needs to be responsible for.

KATIE FERGUSON: Not all of us can afford to send our children to—

The CHAIR: Yes, of course.

TODD SELLERS: I understand this Committee will do a report that is going to go back to Parliament on 28 October and then of course Parliament will deliberate over that in the sitting.

The CHAIR: We report initially. The Government makes a response within six months. But our main opportunity is that the education department will be here for our second day of the hearings, which I think is on 28 May. Obviously your issue will bulk large in the comments we will be making to the department. We are hoping that from the exposure of the difficulties that you have got that the Government will be prompted into moving a lot faster.

TODD SELLERS: Thank you, Mr Latham, because that is the point I was moving towards. My understanding was 28 October was the report, but what can be done between now and then? I know you folks are not the people responsible for that, but what can be done between now and then is where I was leading to.

The CHAIR: I will be visiting there for you in the beginning of June.

TODD SELLERS: Thank you.

KATIE FERGUSON: Happy to meet you.

The CHAIR: I am hoping that the Opposition—

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I will be there as well.

The CHAIR: You will?

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Okay, we will organise a subcommittee to come up and have a look. One would also assume that in the way of these things, the Opposition would be continuing to put pressure on the Government. There is an election in New South Wales in March and parties need to make commitments to bring your school up to an acceptable standard because you have obviously been left behind. Unless there is some incredible explanation for this, you have been left behind when the normal process is that if you know that urban development is coming, a country school needs to be upgraded with permanent buildings. We saw that at Schofields, which to me looked like a pretty good performance, but it has not been applied to you.

KATIE FERGUSON: The response that I am getting from Minister Mitchell's office, Mr Latham, is that our school is rural—

TODD SELLERS: No.

KATIE FERGUSON: —and we do not require the appropriate fencing; chicken wire is perfectly fine. My own son sometimes gets a little bit hot-headed and he can see that fence as a hurdle, so he jumped in.

The CHAIR: Rural? But these are new suburban homes across the road from it.

KATIE FERGUSON: They absolutely are.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Exactly, and there are more coming.

KATIE FERGUSON: We are less than—how far would you say the main road is? The main road is very, very busy.

TODD SELLERS: It is 600 metres.

KATIE FERGUSON: We have queues from Maitland roundabout all the way through Gillieston Heights on a morning.

The CHAIR: Right. This is the road connecting Maitland and Cessnock. Is that right?

KATIE FERGUSON: Maitland to Cessnock, yes.

TODD SELLERS: If you refer to my document number two, you will see geographically where Gillieston school is in comparison to Maitland Public School and Rutherford and East Maitland. That will give you an idea of the dimensions there. When we talk about this school being treated differently to the others because it is rural, I am sorry, you need to redraw your lines in regard to what you class as rural. This is a metropolitan, suburban area which is not being treated the same as the others.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: But even if it is rural, it still needs to be attended to.

KATIE FERGUSON: They built us a McDonalds, Domino's, an IGA, yet we are still rural. We can have a Macca's; I go and get a Big Mac—whatever. It is not fair, it really is not.

The CHAIR: Thank you for bringing it to our attention.

KATIE FERGUSON: Thank you for your time. It is very much appreciated.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your passion and caring about your children so comprehensively. We are going to try to do something to assist. We will find out more information and visit there ourselves and put more pressure on the Government to correct a wrong.

TODD SELLERS: Thank you, Mr Latham.

KATIE FERGUSON: As P&C president, I would love to show you around, Mr Latham.

The CHAIR: Yes, we will be there—myself and Anthony D'Adam at least.

TODD SELLERS: Again, I would like to keep this as bipartisan as we can, if possible. I would love to see Mr Fang and Mr Farlow. You are more than welcome to come. I would very duly love to see Liberal and Labor there with yourself. I would think that if you were not to be there, it would be a gaping hole. It would be really important to see that.

The CHAIR: Our Committee tends to operate that way, and we try to do what is right. We will try and help.

KATIE FERGUSON: I have invited the department several times to come and have a look because I am pretty sure they are looking at a 2010 Google Maps, but Minister Mitchell does not respond to my messages directly.

The CHAIR: Thanks for your time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Mr HENRY RAJENDRA, Deputy President, Australian Education Union NSW Teachers Federation Branch, affirmed and examined

Mr GREG BUTLER, Research/Industrial Officer, Australian Education Union NSW Teachers Federation Branch, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I thank our final witnesses for the day from the NSW Teachers Federation, Henry Rajendra and Greg Butler. Thanks for your submission and time. It is available to you to make a short statement if you wanted to before we go to Committee questions.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes, I would like to make a few opening remarks. First and foremost, as officers of the NSW Teachers Federation we strongly believe that our students deserve the highest standard of school and classroom infrastructure, whether it is in metropolitan areas of New South Wales, regional and rural. Irrespective of socio-economic status, all our students deserve that high quality. We also believe that an infrastructure program adequate enough to deal with the existing need and, of course, with the projected growth in student numbers—but of course to maintain that particular program of works, recognising the priority that is necessary for our school communities in the Northern Rivers area that have been devastated by the floods.

I also just want to take this opportunity to update this inquiry in terms of important data courtesy of what we have learned from the department's submission. We want to put on record that we do take notice that the department forecast—and this is a big concern of ours—that they project that there will be an increase of 180,000 students from an 820,000 figure to one million by 2039, and that should be something of serious consideration for this inquiry. We also want to put on record—and I think we put this in our submission—the Auditor-General's report that warned that, under current funding levels, it will not deliver the classes we need from 2023 onwards, and they call for a 10-year plan that factors all these things, particularly in terms of enrolment growth, where they are going to be et cetera.

It is important for me to also say two more things and this goes to the issue of climate—with respect to the 2019/2020 bushfires and the recent floods, that there are multiple lines of scientific evidence that show that the incidence of these extreme weather events will increase as the planet warms and the impacts on our teachers, our students and their communities will only get worse. This Government has responsibility to consider the impacts of climate change when it looks at school infrastructure, not just in terms of how the decisions it makes in this area can contribute to either increasing or reducing greenhouse gas emissions but also in terms of mitigating the risks of climate change. Every school and every TAFE college, whether it is a new or existing building, must be climate resilient and able to provide a safe environment for teaching and learning.

More to the point, our most severely affected areas in terms of the impacts of climate change—heat, for example—are also our most disadvantaged communities, e.g., western Sydney. In January 2020 Penrith, for example, registered as the hottest place on earth, reaching a high of 48.9 degrees, breaking records that had gone back 80 years. Finally, I just want to make a comment about—this goes obviously within infrastructure but it also goes to the heart of the commitment by any government, but particularly this Government—the provision of public preschooling in this State. I think we need to pay sharp attention to this incredibly poor, I guess, set of priorities of the Government: the lack of public preschooling. We have over 1,700—

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order: Chair, I am going to make the point that this is not part of the inquiry. It is also not part of the terms of reference. Look, the fact that the gentlemen are still here and have not walked out with Scott's and my presence—that is great. But I think we are well past the terms of reference now.

The CHAIR: I am going to allow the witness latitude in making an opening statement, which from what I heard so far is within—

The Hon. WES FANG: I am not sure that preschool education is quite the remit of school infrastructure but by all means the Teachers Federation have wide remit.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: To the point of order: There are a number of situations where preschools are part of the build and clearly that is within the terms of reference of this inquiry.

The CHAIR: Yes, preschools can be co-located with schools, of course. That is true. So, Henry, I rule you in order but ask you to stick as closely to the terms of reference as possible and then we can get to questions.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Absolutely. And I appreciate the opportunity to just expand on that. Public preschools, where they are—the 100 in New South Wales—are not only co-located with our public schools. They are actually part of our system and, to the point, we also have a Minister for education who also has responsibilities for early learning. And School Infrastructure also has a responsibility in this space. I just wanted to be up-front. That is something that needs strong attention, not only from an infrastructure point of view but for the learning of

our children. The evidence has long been in: They need it, particularly in our most disadvantaged communities. I will finish my opening comments there. Thanks.

The CHAIR: In your submission there was a statement that "design must follow pedagogy, not the converse". Could you elaborate on the meaning of that, please?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Sure. Regrettably, the experience of some schools, whether they are going through a significant upgrade, a rebuild et cetera, there has been often—maybe conflict is a strong word, but there has certainly been processes put in place where pedagogy, what happens in our classroom, what are our rewards, what do class sizes look like are inferior, have not been prioritised compared to what an architect may want a school to look like. Post the build of these unfortunate circumstances, the experience of these schools is that they find something that they then have to fix up.

For example, there were some schools that had that open space learning. It was a fad. In fact, it has been a fad for over 40 years, but fads, as they are, they reinvent themselves and someone wants to own it and this has occurred over recent years. Open space learning is where they combine three classes or more into one big space and there is no walls in between. And when teachers and students return to that rebuilt site they are then left with this quandary of, well, what do you do. This is just not fit for purpose in terms of teaching and learning. Then you have to retrofit the whole site there in terms of putting in walls.

So what we call for—architects are absolutely necessary but they have got to work with teachers, with experts and with those that know what is required of the classroom, what student needs there are. Critically, around student need, the complexity within one class let alone across a whole school has to be factored in when you conduct these builds. So there has been some issues around what is the priority and we strongly insist—and we continue to work with the Department of Education, with School Infrastructure to try and reach a point where there is an understanding that we do not go from an unfortunate build that can sometimes turn into an industrial issue—teachers have had enough—and then we are going from school to school. We want to have clear direction about how this is addressed by way from the top down to the school level.

The CHAIR: So when you say it is a 40-year fad—and I share your scepticism—what is the Teachers Federation policy on these design issues that maximise student performance? Because there are two strands to this inquiry. One is obviously the provision of quality buildings for students, particularly in growth areas or where there has been a surge in population in an older area and the school has not kept up. So there is the physical infrastructure and then there is a second strand to our inquiry, perhaps not as frontline, that design also bears relevance to how we can lift student performance. A lot of the evidence shows that these so-called open-space learning classes—as you say, amalgamating three or four—do not maximise the results that the school would be wanting.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes. Some of the studies that I have seen over time, particularly when this was such a hot issue back in 2018—it is less so now—was there was no consideration of the impact of those in terms of anxiety of those who have hearing difficulties. It was quite regrettable because the fad goes ahead in terms of the priority of the needs of our kids, and it is really unfortunate. You see this played out in places and it impacts on those kids. Our teachers know it, first and foremost, and, of course, parents. We are working with the department to come up with a very clear position. Open-space learning was once called "flexible learning spaces". It could not be more inflexible by its design, because you could not do anything more than have those three classes into one—have an English class next to a drama class. It was just incredible. We are insisting and we are hoping that we can reach some sort of agreement with the department.

There is a set standard in terms of a design, and we are no longer completely open to bespoke design plans from school to school. We are hoping that we can reach, and we are confident that we can reach, an agreement with the Department of Education that we can have a uniform application of what a rebuild or a new school looks like that factors in the needs of our students, the expertise of our teachers, conditions that are related to the award and class sizes within the staffing agreement et cetera. I am hopeful of a sensible outcome with regard to this. It has come courtesy of some strong positions that were established by the union back in 2018 at our annual conference on this particular matter, and we have been pursuing School Infrastructure throughout that time. Clearly we wanted to have settled this much earlier, but we are hopeful that we will get some form of understanding that this would be a positive agreed approach.

The CHAIR: So you have been trying to reach heads of agreement about this question?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Correct.

The CHAIR: Is there an expectation that might be achieved before the March election, when the Parliament goes into recess?

HENRY RAJENDRA: I am hoping for right now. We are trying our best. Phone calls continue to be regularly made. We will continue to pursue it, but the conversations have been very positive in this particular area.

The CHAIR: It sounds like you are making more progress than I made with the department at estimates when I raised this problem and the hearing issues—

HENRY RAJENDRA: Give me a call next time.

The CHAIR: —and the open-space learning, where the department just said, "Oh, no, it is just flexibility." I have heard the patter over the years and none of it impresses me. Can I finally ask, is the federation aware of the document *Exploring fit-for-purpose contemporary learning spaces*, which has been sent to me? It is now off its website. It appears to be a School Infrastructure NSW literature search about what works in school design for lifting student results. I will take it up with the department. I think a lot of the conclusions it reaches about John Hattie's research in here are just not valid. Is the federation aware of this document? I am going to circulate it to the Committee, because it seems to be driving some of the decisions about design without a valid evidence base. What are the documents that you have relied on in negotiating with the department as to this approach on design?

HENRY RAJENDRA: I have not seen that particular document, to answer your question. But the arguments that we have put forward go to the experiences of teachers. We have also, as I have said before, cited academic research in terms of impacts on young people, particularly those with complex needs. We still have our awards and staffing agreements that dictate what happens in a classroom. Of course, in terms of the experience of our teachers, it goes to the issue around the expectations of curriculum and our lesson preparation and so on.

The CHAIR: There is a Macquarie University study that shows that it is very hard for hearing-impaired students, particularly at the back of these shared spaces to even hear what is going on.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes, that is the one.

The CHAIR: If you get a student where it is not in their personality to arc up about it, they are disadvantaged by that reality, which leaves them further and further behind.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Sure.

The CHAIR: At this stage I will table the document for the Committee and we can explore that later on.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: You talk about The Ponds High School and Riverbank Public School in your submission. The Committee has inspected Riverbank Public School. About a decade ago a primary school with over 1,000 kids was considered unusual. Riverbank has more than 2,000 students. It seems that the department is increasingly building schools on a massive scale. I wanted to ask you what your views are about that apparent trend in terms of the approach to building these large-scale schools rather than the mid-sized schools of 300- to 400-student capacity?

HENRY RAJENDRA: The other thing to point out is clearly such big schools can be quite difficult in terms of what parents would prefer. For example, in Murwillumbah the collapse of the four schools into two has caused significant distress, where parents have felt comfortable going to particularly the smaller primary schools and then the prospect of going to a larger one has unsettled quite a number of parents.

The Hon. WES FANG: Sorry, the parents are unsettled by it?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes. The conversations that I have had with those parents up there when I visited, one bit of the feedback when I asked them, "How do you feel about this?", those in the current schools said, "We're quite concerned about going to a big site with a lot of people", and they prefer their smaller school.

The Hon. WES FANG: You use a word like "distress".

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: The parents are "distressed" by this?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Correct. That is what I observed. This is when I went there at the end of 2020.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: That is the evidence.

The Hon. WES FANG: What distresses them about it?

HENRY RAJENDRA: They are used to having their small, almost village-type feel school, and this—

The Hon. WES FANG: "Distress" is quite a descriptive word, though.

HENRY RAJENDRA: I am telling you that is what I saw. I am physical with them and they are telling me. They are quite concerned and I could not ignore it.

The Hon. WES FANG: When you say "distress", what is distressing about it for them?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Like I said, going en masse into a big site with the two high schools coming into one—

The Hon. WES FANG: This is the parents you are talking about?

HENRY RAJENDRA: I beg your pardon?

The Hon. WES FANG: This is the parents you are talking about?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes. Let me finish my answer.

The Hon. WES FANG: Sure.

HENRY RAJENDRA: When the two high schools came onto one site and the two primary are also on the same site, they have this visual. People have used the word "mega" et cetera, and that is causing them distress.

The Hon. WES FANG: I cannot imagine their pain.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: One of the issues that was raised with us in one of the schools that we visited, also a large school—was it Gledswood Hills or Gregory Hills?

The CHAIR: Which one?

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Gregory Hills is not built yet.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Gregory Hills is the one that was not built. At Gledswood Hills—and that school also has over 1,000 students—one of the issues was about the number of people converging on the site at the end of the school day for pick-up. Do you have some comments about that as an issue in terms of student and teacher safety?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes. That goes to the logistics, obviously. It is a massive effort. It is not just 1,000 students; it is everyone else who goes along with that—you have got teachers. We would want to hope that when planning does happen for such sites that all these factors are taken into consideration, plus other traffic and so on and parents at pick-up. Of course, there is public transport. We would hope, as part of the overall design and modelling, that these things are looked at.

The other thing, just coming back to the examples that you mentioned earlier, is that once you build these—and we accept that some of these schools are looking fantastic. But within a nanosecond, or a short period of time, we are then faced with demountables being brought onto site. Regrettably, it is a lack of planning. These demountables stay for a number of years. We should not have this appetite within School Infrastructure and the department to have demountables when, hopefully, they are being informed by quality demographic data about the growth in that community and, therefore, you would have less reliance on demountables. That is something that we have raised with the department as well on a number of occasions.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: One of the issues that we also noticed at the Riverbank Public School, given the scale, was the lack of play space. We are advised that Riverbank Public School has 5.52 metres square per student, which is half of the recommended play space that should be provided for children. Does that have an impact on behaviour management? Is that a factor? If there is not enough space for the kids to run around, exercise and play, can that affect behavioural issues in a school?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Of course. It is difficult on any given playground duty, and those that have done it know the dynamics and the wrangling that you have to work with. I recall my times out in western Sydney at the school that I taught at. I really want to point out that, yes, there are behaviour issues, but in terms of play space and the importance of it, it goes to that social development. Again, this comes back to pedagogy before design. The playground is an important part of schooling. It is not a lunch break or a morning tea break. This is part of their social development. A lot of kids' skills are developed in sometimes less structured ways, like you would in the classroom. It is important that kids have that space to engage with their peers in that environment.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: One of the things that we were advised by the officials who accompany us on our visits was that, for new builds for primary schools, they are actually not planning to provide substantial playing fields for organised sporting activities and PSSA. Do you have some comments about the impact that might have on the delivery of the curriculum?

HENRY RAJENDRA: This is play space?

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Play space, yes.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Of course. There are things, whether it is PDHPE or other activities, that the school engages in. You need this space. I am not expert in terms of what the available land was at the time et cetera, but it would be a shame, particularly with newer estates—it is the public infrastructure that needs to take priority, and you build around that. Set up the public infrastructure, whether it is roads, hospitals or, of course, schools, and you know the population is going to grow. It baffles me when I see that sometimes that is not the overall consideration. I think a level of common sense would help in terms of when newer communities and newer estates are established. Again, I am not expert on that, but that is what I observe.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Good afternoon. I wanted to ask you a little bit about the impact of shabby facilities on staff and teachers. Obviously, this is a place of education, but it is also a place of work. Can you talk a little bit about the impact that it has on morale and whether there are examples of schools that do not meet the minimum standards for safe workplaces?

HENRY RAJENDRA: To pick up this sentiment and your actual question, this goes to the issue of respect. Our teachers are absolutely dedicated to their students. Equally, parents are very supportive of the work that is conducted in our schools. When you are working in many schools that are substandard, I would argue that it is a reflection of a lack of respect from the department et cetera in terms of the work that teachers do and what students engage in. It does impact on morale. It does impact when you sometimes want to question whether you want to go to a toilet that is not of an appropriate standard. It does impact on the sensory needs of our students, whether it is about smells and so on. These things have to be factored in. I have visited the Parramatta department office. I wish all schools had that standard. Quite frankly, I am not sure that whoever thought it was a good idea to build this new Department of Education could actually live with themselves knowing there are schools throughout the State that come nowhere near the standards that are applied to that Parramatta office. I have been in that office. It is great to walk in.

The CHAIR: Can you elaborate? I have not been there. I do not get invited.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Go through and visit it. It is on Phillip Street in Parramatta.

The CHAIR: What are you referring to?

HENRY RAJENDRA: It is the Department of Education's head office.

The CHAIR: What is it about it that—

HENRY RAJENDRA: It is brand new.

The CHAIR: It is brand new. Luxurious?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Luxurious.

The CHAIR: Nice, clean, functional toilets?

HENRY RAJENDRA: It has got respect. I visit a lot of schools. I am looking forward to heading up to Newcastle in the next couple of days and up to Tamworth et cetera next week. I am delighted by meeting up with the kids and the teachers. The kids, in particular, make your day, but you cannot help but glance around and know that things could be a bit better in terms of the facilities.

The CHAIR: We should put the department in demountables—

HENRY RAJENDRA: Do what you want to do with them—

The CHAIR: —so they get the full—

HENRY RAJENDRA: What gets me up in the morning is I want the best for our kids. When I say "the best", I am not talking gold plated. I am just talking that I cannot look kids in the face and walk away going, "Well, fly in and fly out, I have seen that matter." Our kids matter. Every single kid matters, particularly those in our more complex and struggling communities.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is it not a bit class warfare-ish to say the department has a new building in Parramatta but XYZ? When you say "luxuries", what do you mean? It is an office space where the department meets at work and do the functions of a government department, providing schools across the State.

HENRY RAJENDRA: I could not agree more. We are not begrudging our colleagues that also work in there. What we are saying is that there are different standards.

The Hon. WES FANG: You talked about luxuries. The picture you are painting is—and it is to your benefit, obviously. What is it that you think they are getting that is not provided to a teacher at a secondary or primary school? What additional things are they provided?

HENRY RAJENDRA: There is technology, for one. I am not begrudging the department, let us be very clear. I am talking about—

The Hon. WES FANG: You have made some comments—

HENRY RAJENDRA: I would not mind answering the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: You have made some comments about this.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Point of order—

The CHAIR: Order! The witness should finish his answer. It will be recapping the point that we want all facilities and schools up to a—

HENRY RAJENDRA: This is about standards. Whoever came up with that, they should apply to all schools across the State.

The Hon. WES FANG: That is what I am asking. What—

HENRY RAJENDRA: There is technology and there is upkeep. Hopefully, you have been to some of our schools where the standards are so obvious that they need improvements on, like torn carpets, windows that cannot open and blinds that have—it is disrespectful. I am pointing out the obvious. There is a standard that has been applied. I like it. It should be applied to every school across the State without argument.

The Hon. WES FANG: I am going to reiterate the point—

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I think this question has already been asked.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: You do not even know what he has asked.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: He started by saying, "I am going to reiterate the point."

The Hon. WES FANG: I am going to reiterate the point that I am unclear about what it is that you think the department's staff in Parramatta have over other employees of the education department.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: He has already asked this question.

The CHAIR: We will take that as having been answered previously. For the Committee, we visited Concord High School, where they have got pretty ordinary toilet facilities in six or seven different spots on the campus.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I am assuming there are no demountable toilets at the Department of Education.

The CHAIR: I think we can safely work on that assumption. Mr D'Adam, your question.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I want to come back to Riverbank Public School. One of the things that I noticed when we were on our site visit was the absence of trees. You mentioned the environmental impact. Another observation that was made by the representatives from the department who were accompanying us on our visits was the preference for shifting to artificial turf for play spaces, as opposed to natural grass. I wonder whether you can perhaps offer some comments about that—whether there are any issues associated with the shift to, say, astroturf in schools rather than having natural grass, from an environmental aspect but also from a behavioural, student management aspect as well.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes, and of course in terms of what is best for the environment, in terms of risk mitigation, in terms of extreme heat, the natural environment, from my point of view I guess, would be preferable. Having trees is something in terms of—you talked about morale earlier on. It is just good for the soul, I think. But in terms of the environment, the more that we can commit to, particularly on our sites with the whole aspect of climate and the environment, the planting of trees and of course in terms of solar—all these factors are important as an overall aspect in terms of the environment.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Tree canopy can have a cooling effect, of course, on school infrastructure, on students themselves when they are outside at play. It has been suggested to me that in mid-summer when you have astroturf, it gets incredibly hot and actually the kids cannot sit down on the ground. Is that correct?

HENRY RAJENDRA: I am not directly familiar with that. But I guess it would make sense to me. If you have concrete underneath that astroturf, for example, it is not like the natural environment where you can absorb that heat.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: When we look at instances like at the moment where we have a lot of rain, though, when it comes to astroturf, you can use it a lot more often than you can when it comes to natural grass, where you might have an oval that is closed off for weeks or the like.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Sure.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: That is why a lot of councils have moved across to play spaces that are astroturfed as well to be able to get more use out of them.

The CHAIR: Yes, at Riverbank they are building the astroturf as their play area, and the principal was pretty excited about it actually. I suppose for soccer and hockey the level surface is—there are pluses and minuses. I suppose it is a bit warmer. But for soccer and hockey it is a level surface for the competitive sport, not as irregular as the old back paddock.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: If we look at schools with large numbers of enrolments, I think for all of us, when we hear the number 2,000 at a school, that number is jarring. Of course, there are difficulties and challenges with a school like that. But I think from seeing a school like Riverbank, we see it is sort of a victim of its own success in a sense. People want to go to that school because it is a high-performing school. We have seen it with other schools as well, like Westmead Public School, for instance, where you have a school down the road that is under-enrolled, but people want to go to that school because of its performance and because of its academic results. Is that something you are seeing across the network of schools where you do have a honeypot, so to speak, where people actually want to enrol in those schools because of their success?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Have I seen it?

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Yes.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes, I have seen schools where one is much larger than the other. There is a whole range of factors as well. So, for example, not every school community has a support class or a support unit, and that can impact on whether the enrolments are large or small. Sometimes the facilities just give the school away—the shiny school down the road. But we would certainly believe or we stand by that there are drawing areas for our schools. That is just not only critical in terms of maximising public infrastructure—that we are not under-utilising sites when it is over-utilised elsewhere—but it is also the sense of community, to be someone from that street, playing with your neighbours and going to the same school. That, for us, is also part of that greater, broader aspect of the provision of public education, particularly for that community. We would subscribe to that particular view as our position.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I guess, in a sense, one of the challenges with the drawing area comes—and we heard it today, I think, from the Lennox Head community about where they have had a change in the drawing area of the school and that has a significant impact in the community. But the alternative is that you maintain a drawing area but for at least a period of time you have more demountables and potentially less play space in those schools as well. Is that not the challenge and the balance that you have to strike?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes, and I think this also comes to planning well ahead would really assist in how that all unfolds. I think, certainly from my observations, that insufficient planning has led to some of these moments, regrettably, where the demand on demountables—or it is unforeseen that there is a new estate that has been established. It looks like, it feels like a bit of an afterthought about the impact on that school. We would prefer that it is more at the front end of the conversation when it comes to the provision of—sorry, not just provision but how big that school is and are they ready, and would there be a need for another school further down the road to try to take the load of a growing community.

The CHAIR: Are there other questions from Committee members?

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: You speak in your submission about the cumulative capital investment gap between the public system and non-government schools. Earlier in the hearing we had a document provided to us which lists the New South Wales Government's Building Grants Assistance Scheme to non-government schools, which provides for extensive expenditure on capital for the private system. Could you perhaps elaborate a bit more on that aspect of your submission?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes. It does not give us any great joy when—firstly, the 10-year plan is something that I think we will all be very interested in, particularly when the Auditor-General makes such a finding. Of course, what goes with that is a funding commitment, knowing that there is a lot of work to be done

in this particular area. When we have a Federal Government that is throwing \$1.9 billion at the private sector for capital and zero to us, that hurts. Then you add the \$500 million for non-govs over four years for infrastructure, when we have such a massive need, and there are a number of private schools that will benefit from that investment when they are overfunded as it is in comparison to the SRS but also in terms of the infrastructure that they enjoy compared to the substandard that is delivered to our public schools.

Clearly these are things that stand out to us, that stand out to our public school communities, and it is something that needs to be addressed. I would want to hope that public schools are the priority of the Government when it comes to infrastructure. So we believe that needs to be addressed. It is unfair to our public schools that it exists in this way, in terms of the carve-up of expenditure, and therefore that is why we want to make that particular point.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Earlier we heard from the parents and citizens of Gillieston Public School. It seemed almost that the Government was aware of the growth in population in the area, and it seemed as if it was perhaps even holding back in terms of investment in the hope that the non-government sector would move into the area and build schools. Did you see that as a trend elsewhere in the State? Is that something that your members are reporting to you?

HENRY RAJENDRA: I have not heard specifically that about that particular school. But I want to make this point: that the first school in any community should be a public school. In fact, it must be a public school, and not as you have suggested there—that they are wishing and praying that if we hold back there would be a private school come in that place. That would be appalling if that was the position.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: To pick up on this private school funding model, in the last year's budget we saw \$3.2 billion given to State government infrastructure when it came to capital expenditure on government schools. The figures you talk about—a \$1.9 billion program from the Feds over 10 years—so the equivalent of that, you are looking at about \$80 million a year for New South Wales schools—

HENRY RAJENDRA: Zero for us.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: —a \$500 million program at a State level over four years, so there is about \$125 million each year. Looking through this school grants project, we are not looking at like Scots College or something. We are looking at Catherine McAuley Catholic College in Medowie. We are looking at what are typically low-fee Catholic and independent schools that are in there, often in developing areas. So it is not like effectively this is this class war, as Mr Fang was talking about before. We are talking about schools that are often in areas of need where parents are struggling, trying to pay for kids to go to a private school and making their own contribution as well, with some part contribution from the State Government.

HENRY RAJENDRA: We have had decades of neglect when it comes to our schools' infrastructure—decades. The announcement of a Schools Infrastructure in 2017—of course, that is a step in the right direction but it has got a massive amount of catch-up.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Indeed, and that is why there has been a sevenfold increase in spending over the last six years.

HENRY RAJENDRA: We need to see a 10-year plan to make sure that we are capturing the needs as they stand now but also the massive growth in enrolments that we are going to see into our public schools in the order of 180,000 by 2039. These things, when they are left unattended, give us fear that we are going to go through another period of time when we are not keeping up or, indeed, catching up from the past when it comes to upgrades. I am not trying to make anything up here. We have had the neglect. We just want a program of rebuild. We just want a program where we can confidently say—we can sit down and go, "Right, here is the 10-year plan. There is an accompanying investment, projections and forward estimates in terms of that kind of commitment." That will give us far more confidence than going through from budget to budget where we are not entirely convinced that our public school needs, upgrades and growth would be matched.

The Hon. WES FANG: Can I just pick up on that theme that you have alluded to in your answer to Mr Farlow there. You have said that there are decades upon decades of failure. So that would presumably mean that you have obviously taken aim at this Government but it would also then mean the failure of the previous Government beforehand.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Correct.

The Hon. WES FANG: So I imagine that, in that instance, there is not a lot of trust with them either. Have you had the opportunity to speak with perhaps the shadow Minister for Education or the Leader of the Opposition and what commitments have they given you that they will be delivering should they be—

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Point of order: This question is outside the terms of reference.

The Hon. WES FANG: "Any other matter" in the terms of reference. I am well within the terms of reference. I am asking the Teachers Federation—

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Well and truly outside.

The Hon. WES FANG: No. I will ask the Chair to rule, but I believe I am well within the terms of reference, Chair, and I am just simply asking the Teachers Federation representatives that are appearing before today what commitments have been given by the shadow Minister or the Leader of the Opposition about school infrastructure and the 10-year plan?

HENRY RAJENDRA: I think it is a good question.

The Hon. WES FANG: It is a great question, I would have thought.

HENRY RAJENDRA: I would not go that far. Since when I was a teacher out in western Sydney and I was a fed rep, we had been hitting up politicians of all flavours. Like I said to you before, the thing that gets me up in the morning is what is best for our kids. We do not see it through the lens of political parties. We talk with everyone and anyone that wants to listen. We will advocate for our kids to the utmost because that is our priority. Being in the classroom as a teacher, there is only one focus and you want the best for our kids. So to answer your good question, we lobby as much as possible not just on infrastructure but a whole range of things, and we certainly continue to call history as it is. Previous governments of all flavours have let our schools down.

The Hon. WES FANG: But I imagine that in the interest of attracting your respect again—and you have used the word "respect" previously—they would have committed to you a number of things. I guess I am asking on the infrastructure program, what commitments are being given to the Teachers Federation—

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Point of order: You have already asked that question.

The Hon. WES FANG: But it was not addressed in the answer. I am simply asking for an elucidation of that.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: That is too bad. That was the answer that the witness chose to give. That is it.

The Hon. WES FANG: I am just asking for an elucidation of it now. Again, that is well within the terms of reference. It is well within the procedural fairness resolution and I would say it is actually in order, Chair.

The CHAIR: It is not the type of question we normally field at the Committee. We probably need to rely on the openness of the federation which is never backward in coming forward with its views in the lead-up to the next State election. I am sure if there is any inadequacy in anyone's policy, we will find out about it. It might be best to move on to other questions at that point.

The Hon. WES FANG: I could take that as a no.

The CHAIR: It is not something that the witness needs to answer.

The Hon. WES FANG: It does not have to, but it would be good for transparency.

The CHAIR: It is not something that we are interrogating. Prue Car's policy is not being interrogated by the Committee.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: You raise a really interesting point in your submission about car parking for staff. My partner is a teacher and I know she routinely lugs kids' books home for marking and has to take them back. If you do not have parking on site and are parking on the street, then you are often lugging quite heavy objects a long way. What is the commitment or what are the current arrangements in terms of provision of staff parking for new builds? Is it adequate? Can it be improved?

The Hon. WES FANG: They should be taking public transport, shouldn't they?

HENRY RAJENDRA: Are you answering?

The CHAIR: Order! Let's get to the answer.

HENRY RAJENDRA: The ones that have been raised with us, we have taken up with School Infrastructure to say that there is insufficient parking for many of our teachers. Public transport just does not cut it. Sometimes in those areas it is not sufficient for where they are travelling from. But, like you said, carrying resources—work does not stop at 3 o'clock and everyone toddles off home as a teacher. I think it is quite evident over the commentary, particularly over the last couple of years with people getting to know the work of teachers.

Teachers take their work home. I am related to teachers. I know their work. It is incredible. So they do need that opportunity where they are supporting by way of having the confidence of rocking up to school with all their resources and things they have taken home to work on, whether it is on the weekend or at nights, and being able to comfortably and safely carry their equipment and resources and kids' work back into school.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Presumably if a school goes over its basic enrolment, the provision for staff parking—because the staff obviously increases with the enrolments—cascades into a problem in terms of staff access to parking and parking spaces and compounds.

GREG BUTLER: It does become a problem, as does the need for additional toilet facilities as well. They usually do not increase as classrooms are delivered.

The CHAIR: Any other questions? I have got one. You might like to take it on notice, just to provide more information about the federation's policy for ideal school design for maximising student results. If you are able to, any more information about attempts to build that into an agreement with the Government for these infrastructure issues. Any extra information you can provide on that front would be useful to the Committee.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Yes, I will.

The CHAIR: So if you are able to take that on notice and come back to us, that would be very much appreciated.

HENRY RAJENDRA: Will do.

The CHAIR: Any other questions around the table? If not, we can thank Henry and Greg. Greg, did you have any final comments you wanted to throw in? Something we have missed?

GREG BUTLER: No, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks for your time. We appreciate the contribution very much. We will carry it forward. Thank you.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 14:47.