



# SCHOOLS FOR OUR FUTURE

A national inquiry into Australia's public school infrastructure needs

MARCH 2026



# Contents

<b>A national infrastructure inquiry.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>A message from the Chair.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>School infrastructure matters.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Enrolment growth, uneven demand &amp; inconsistent data.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. Supporting rising student need, health &amp; wellbeing.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3. Equity gaps in access to quality facilities.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4. Ageing school infrastructure &amp; underinvestment.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>5. Preparing every child for a rapidly changing world.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>6. A lack of national coordination &amp; funding.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>7. A changing role for public schools.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>8. Climate change &amp; environmental resilience.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Terms of reference.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Endnotes.....</b>	<b>26</b>

## Acknowledgement of Country

The AEU acknowledges the Elders and Custodians, past and present of our diverse Nations and Countries. They are the leaders, knowledge holders and the first educators of our Nations and Countries, and we recognise the continuing connection to more than 65,000 years of teaching, learning and sharing. We pay respect to the lores, skies and waters of these Nations and will work together to ensure our future generations continue to look after Country. We genuinely commit to ensuring the voices, wisdom and knowledges of Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are respectfully at the forefront of all decision making and all education workplaces are culturally safe and inclusive teaching and learning environments.

# A national infrastructure inquiry



High quality public schools are essential for equity, inclusion and to prepare every child for a rapidly changing world.

That is why the Australian Education Union has established this school infrastructure inquiry.

We believe more must be done to ensure that we have the public schools we need for the future, in every community.

Right now, it's clear that funding hasn't kept pace with demand.

States and territories are going it alone on the construction of new schools and the upgrading of existing ones.

There is no national public school infrastructure plan and no national funding.

This is at a time, when the challenges and opportunities facing our public school system, as set out in this issues paper, are significant and increasing.

Over 2.6 million students are educated in public schools every day.

We owe it to them and the hard-working teachers, principals and education support personnel that educate these students to ensure that every school has the high quality learning environments that give them the best chance to succeed.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Correna Haythorpe".

**Correna Haythorpe**  
*Federal President,  
Australian Education Union*

## A message from the Chair



It's an honour to be given the opportunity to chair this important inquiry.

I have seen the value and importance of high quality public schools throughout my life – as a student, teacher, union official and as president of the AEU and the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

In recent years, as part of my work as an advocate for climate action, I have been involved in efforts to ensure schools are prepared for a changing climate and able to reap the benefits of investments in sustainability and energy efficiency.

This inquiry has the task of examining the current state of public school infrastructure across the country, to assess future needs in light of demographic, technological

and pedagogical trends and make recommendations about what is needed to ensure there are safe, inclusive, future-ready public schools for every child.

This issues paper sets out some of the challenges and opportunities facing the public school system and the questions we will be looking for answers to.

We intend to consult widely with school communities, governments, education and community organisations as well as groups representing young people, students with disability, rural and remote Australians, Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Submissions to the inquiry will open in April and the inquiry's website ([schoolsforourfuture.org.au](https://schoolsforourfuture.org.au)) allows for feedback and comments to be provided at any time.

On behalf of myself and deputy chair Maurie Mulheron, I encourage everybody who has an interest in the future education of children and our public schools to get involved in the inquiry.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S. Burrow'.

**Sharan Burrow**  
*Chair*

# School infrastructure matters

*Where children learn affects how well they learn.*

Research shows a strong connection between the classrooms and facilities at a school and the attendance, behaviour and academic achievements of students.

They also impact on the capacity of a school to attract and retain teachers and how effective they are in the classroom.

A US study found in 2025 that capital investment has an impact of learning of a similar magnitude to recurrent investment. *“On the capital investment side, spending on school facilities also improves student outcomes, both directly (e.g. providing healthy and safe spaces for student learning) and indirectly (e.g. supporting teacher recruitment and retention by offering high-quality, productive workspaces).”<sup>1</sup>*

Twenty-first century learning, with the focus on meeting the individual needs of students and equipping them with the knowledge and skills to be successful, requires safe, modern and inclusive teaching and learning environments.

## Eight key challenges for public schools



**Enrolment growth, uneven demand & inconsistent data**



**Supporting rising student need, health, and wellbeing**



**Equity gaps in access to quality facilities**



**Ageing school infrastructure and underinvestment**



**Preparing every child for a rapidly changing world**



**A lack of national coordination and funding**



**A changing role for public schools**



**Climate change and environmental resilience**

In the following pages, each of these identified challenges is discussed in detail and questions posed. We invite submissions from all interested parties, including school communities, governments, academics, education, disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, that address all or some of the themes identified in this issues paper.

1.



## Enrolment growth, uneven demand & inconsistent data

Over the decade to 2024, public school enrolments in Australia increased by just over 210,000 to 2.62 million.<sup>ii</sup>

The rate of change varied significantly across the country. Rapid increases in the growth corridors of major cities, in particular, are creating pressure points across the public school system.

Some schools face significant overcrowding issues while others are underutilised.

In the AEU's 2025 State of Our Schools survey, one quarter of principals (24%) said they did not have enough permanent classrooms to meet enrolment demands.<sup>iii</sup> A significantly higher proportion (38%) estimated they will not have enough

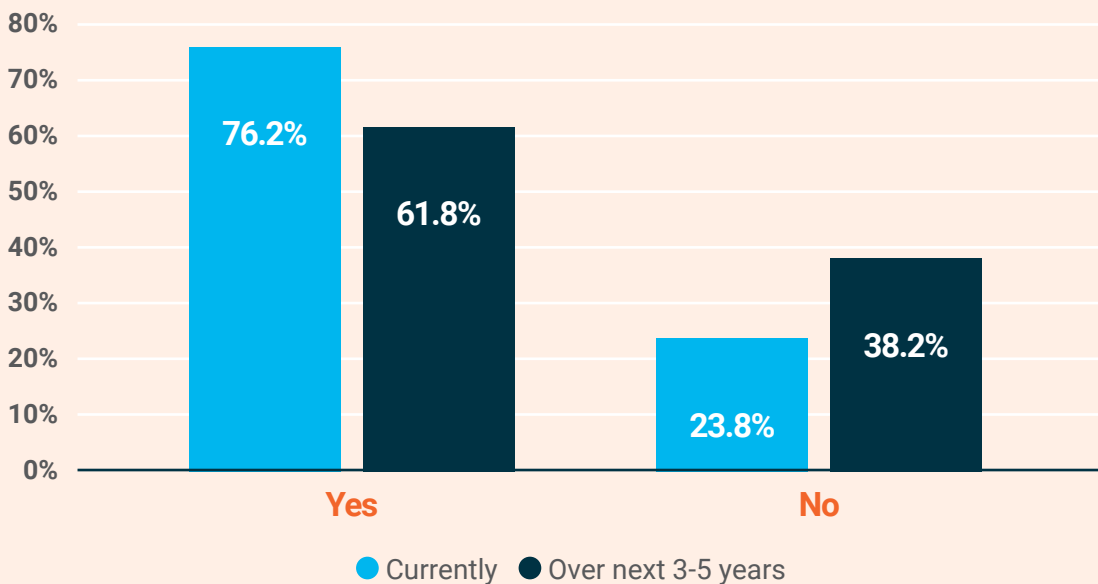
permanent classrooms to meet enrolment demands over the next three to five years.

The average number of additional classrooms required was 5.5 per school. Across the country this means at least an additional 14,000 classrooms will be required by 2030.

Future population projections show the number of school age children in Australia will rise significantly over the next 25 years.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics projects that by 2050 there will be an additional 2.35 million children aged between 5 and 19 years in Australia, an increase of 45.3% from the current population of 5.18 million in that age range.<sup>iv</sup>

### Principals – my school has enough permanent classrooms to meet enrolment demand<sup>v</sup>



## Demountable/transportable buildings

Demountable classrooms and buildings (also known as transportable buildings) are being used as short and long term fixes for rising enrolments and the need for additional amenities and school facilities.

The reliance on demountable buildings has come despite the concerns of many principals and teachers that many are outdated and ill-suited to modern teaching and learning.

In the 2025 State of Our Schools survey, criticisms of demountable classrooms included that they were in poor condition and too small, creating cramped conditions for students and limiting the capacity for teachers to set up breakout or time-out spaces, run group work or use diverse teaching strategies.

Many principals said the demountable buildings at their school were inaccessible for students with disability, lacked proper insulation and ventilation and were expensive to maintain.

There are now more than 20,000 demountable buildings in use in public schools in Australia.<sup>vi</sup> Some were installed as far back as the 1950s.

## Inconsistent data and information

The information state and territory governments publish on population forecasts and changing student demographics at a state and regional level varies enormously. This complicates long-term infrastructure planning for public schools and makes it difficult to determine whether available budget and classroom capacity forecasts are appropriate.

Fifteen years ago, the Review of Funding for Schooling lamented the lack of consistent national data on school infrastructure, stating *“because Australia does not have an accepted national standard against which the adequacy of school infrastructure can be assessed, it is not possible to know whether these figures indicate a significant under- or overinvestment in school capital in any schooling sector.”*<sup>vii</sup>

Most industrialised countries produce publicly available and detailed reports and statistics on the number, age and condition of school buildings,<sup>viii</sup> but this information is not readily available for any Australian jurisdiction. When it is made available in response to Freedom of Information requests it is of variable quality, methodologically inconsistent and not easily comparable across the states and territories.

### Key questions

- I **Should governments be required to meet a national reporting standard for school infrastructure, including nationally consistent data on the condition of classrooms and buildings and current and projected future enrolments at each school?**
  - a) **What would an effective reporting standard look like?**
  - b) **What measures should be included?**

## 2.



# Supporting rising student need, health & wellbeing

The needs of children in public schools are changing, and schools need to change with them.

In the AEU's 2025 State of Our School survey, 95% of principals and teachers said the complexity of needs in their school had increased in the last three years.<sup>ix</sup>

The biggest contributors were student mental health and wellbeing issues, behavioural problems, the growing needs of students with disability and increased number of students with learning difficulties.

There has been a 50% increase in the number of students with disability in public schools since 2015<sup>x</sup> and 90% of those from low socio-educational advantage backgrounds now attend public schools.<sup>xi</sup>

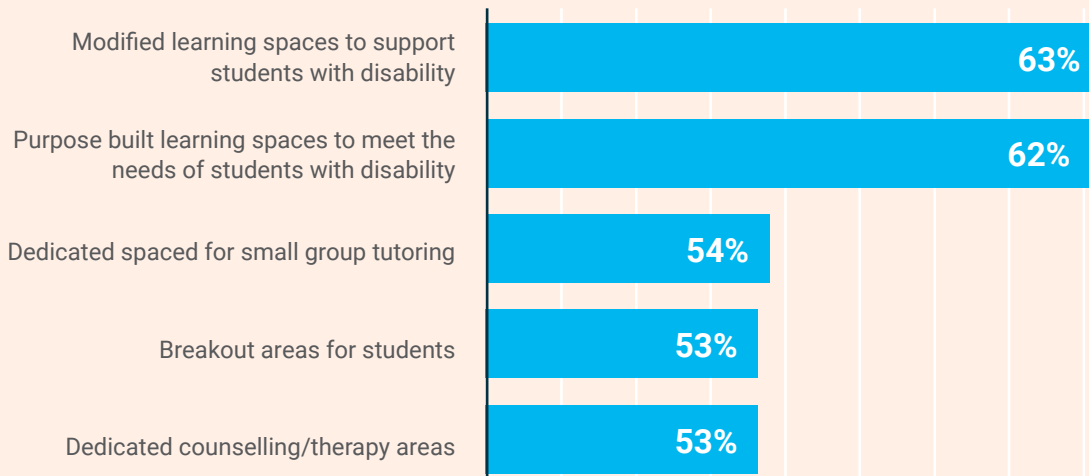
The increasing diversity and complexity of needs means more students require

intensive academic assistance, mental health and wellbeing support and tailored learning environments.

This is where the \$20 billion recurrent investment agreed by the Commonwealth and state and territory governments in 2025 is critical to improve the support that teachers and students receive inside and outside the classroom.

But schools also need the physical and technological infrastructure to support students with physical disability such as ramps, lifts, accessible toilets and showers, wider corridors and doorways, and space to support students in their mental health and wellbeing – such as therapy rooms, sensory areas, breakout areas, wellbeing hubs and flexible learning areas where teachers and specialist staff can effectively meet the needs of each child.

### Principals – % who say school buildings are inadequate<sup>xii</sup>





Results from the AEU's 2025 State of Our Schools survey of over 800 public school principals show many public schools lack the infrastructure required to meet the needs of all students. Almost two thirds of principals said that they do not have adequate learning spaces to support students with disability at their school, whether these spaces are modified (63% inadequate) or purpose built (62% inadequate). Over half of all principals said their school does not have enough dedicated space for small group tutoring (54%), breakout areas to help calm students (53%) or dedicated areas for therapy or counselling (53%).

## Key questions

- II How well do public school facilities support inclusion, student wellbeing and individualised learning? What improvements are needed?
- III What types of learning spaces are required for the future to help public schools accommodate increased student complexity and diversity of learning styles?
- IV What types of learning spaces are required to help schools meet the needs of students with disability?

## 3.



## Equity gaps in access to quality facilities

The creation of a more equitable schooling system has been a primary goal of governments for over two decades.

But the reality is the achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds and locations have only widened over that time.

Public schools educate a disproportionate number of the students with higher needs. They teach 90% of students from low socio-educational advantage backgrounds, 82% of Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students, 67% of students with disability and over 80% of students from remote areas.<sup>xiii</sup>

Concentrations of students from households experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are seven times higher in public schools than in Catholic schools and five times higher than in Independent schools.<sup>xiv</sup> Both the Productivity Commission and the Independent Expert Panel of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System have found that concentration of disadvantage *“has a direct impact on outcomes: students from educationally and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be behind in learning when enrolled in schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students than when enrolled in schools with a more diverse student profile.”*<sup>xv</sup>

Poor quality school infrastructure is a significant contributing factor to the achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds and locations.

A 2011 review commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education found that: *“Poorly designed and maintained schools, often found in areas of lowest educational achievement, can also have a detrimental impact on teacher and student morale and engagement, and impact negatively on aggregate student outcomes.”*<sup>xvi</sup>

Closing achievement gaps requires an effective system of academic, wellbeing and cultural supports for children along with the capacity to deliver a full curriculum.

The infrastructure required includes counselling and wellbeing facilities, quiet rooms and sensory areas and culturally safe spaces for Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students. Schools must also have the spaces and support to be able to increase family and community engagement and run a wide range of extra-curricular activities.

A recent US study found that capital investment can make a huge contribution to closing achievement gaps.

*“Socio-economically disadvantaged districts gain disproportionately from capital investments, even after accounting for project type, yet these districts typically underinvest in such projects. Our findings suggest that closing the spending gap between high- and low-SES districts and prioritizing high-impact investments could reduce the achievement gap between these districts by as much as 25%.”<sup>xvii</sup>*

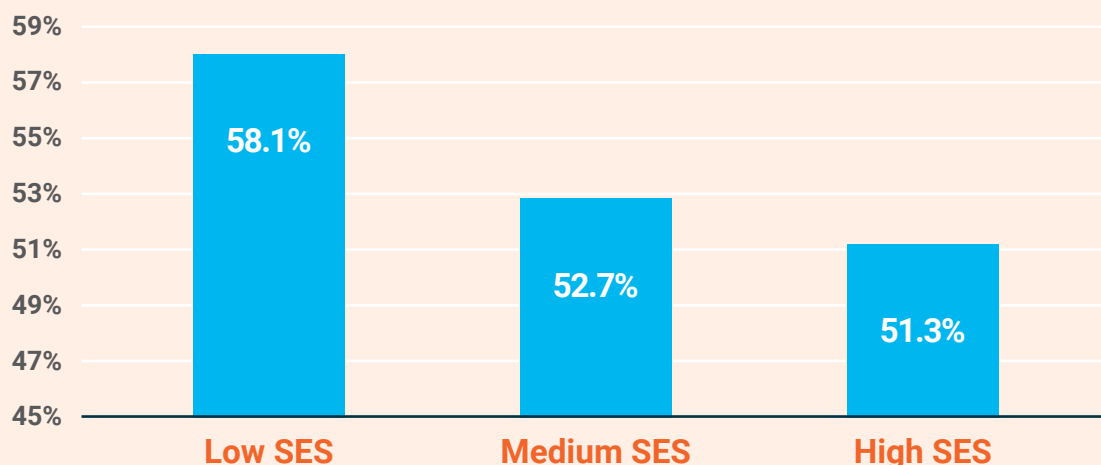
The 2025 State of Our Schools survey of over 10,000 teachers in public schools<sup>xviii</sup> found that the socio-economic status of schools was reflected in how important teachers’ considered upgraded classroom facilities to student outcomes. Across schools from all levels of socio-economic status more than 90% of teachers considered additional funding important for improving student outcomes, but teachers in low socio-economic status (SES) schools were substantially more likely to say that additional funding for upgraded classrooms was “very important” compared to teachers in high SES schools.

## Key questions

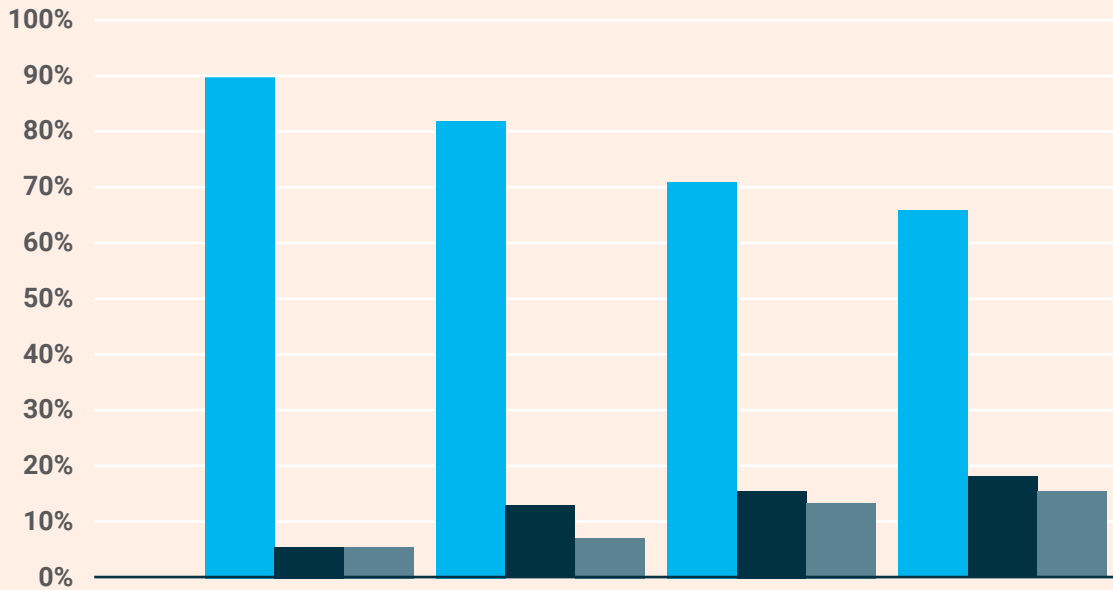
- V How do differences in school infrastructure contribute to inequities in learning, wellbeing and participation?
- VI How can we ensure that the physical environments of public schools are inclusive and culturally safe for Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities?
- VII What are the unique infrastructure challenges experienced by regional and remote public schools?

### Teachers – Additional funding for upgraded classroom facilities would be very helpful for improving student outcomes<sup>xix</sup>

(by socio-economic status of school)



### Percentage of students from priority cohorts by school sector 2024<sup>xx</sup>



	Low Socio-Educational Advantage	Aboriginal Students and Torres Strait Islander Students	Language Background other than English	Students with Disability
Public	90%	82%	71%	67%
Catholic	5%	11%	16%	18%
Independent	5%	7%	13%	15%



# 4.



## Ageing school infrastructure & underinvestment

While there are world class public schools in every state and territory, many schools have buildings and facilities that are operating beyond their intended lifespan or are in poor condition.

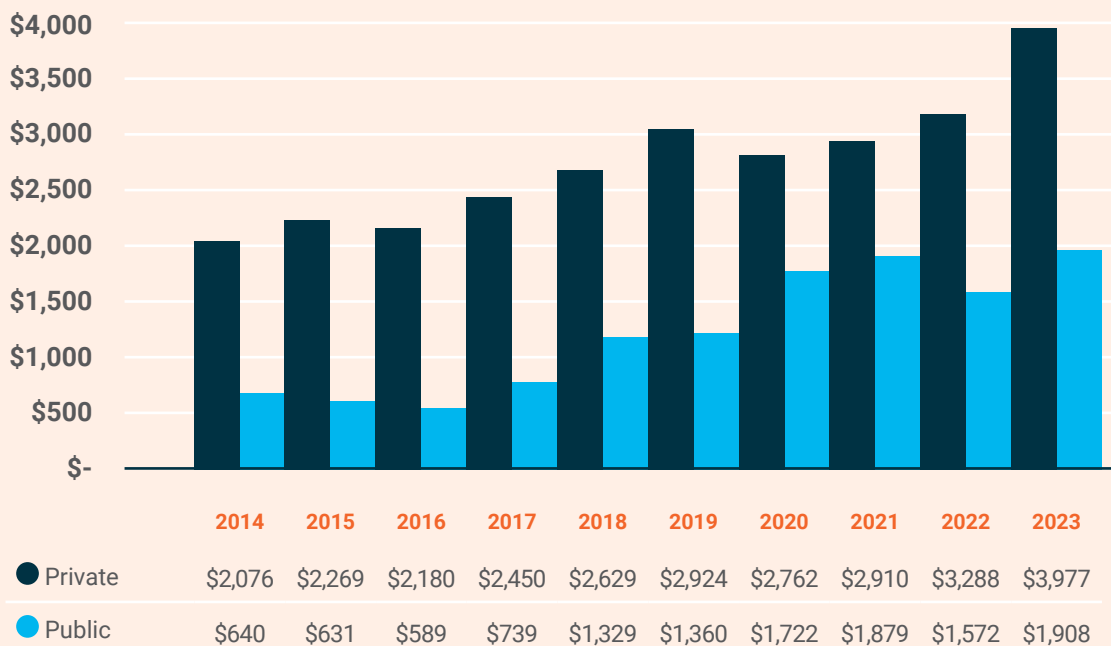
Principals and teachers report that their schools have classrooms and buildings that no longer support contemporary teaching practices, digital learning, accessibility or inclusion.

Government documents show 1 in 5 Victorian public schools are in poor condition<sup>xxi</sup> and more than a third of buildings in Queensland state schools are rated as poor or very poor with an estimated repair bill of \$441 million.<sup>xxii</sup>

In Western Australia, 10,000 defects have been reported across 834 public schools.<sup>xxiii</sup> In South Australia the Department for Education estimates 35% of buildings are past their design life. The proportion assumed to be at or beyond end of life will grow to 75% by 2052.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The continuing usage of buildings beyond their life cycle leads to rapid increases in repair and maintenance costs, as acknowledged by the South Australian Government,<sup>xxv</sup> diverting valuable school resources and the time and focus of school principals, teachers and staff.

Total capital expenditure per student 2014-2023<sup>xxvi</sup>



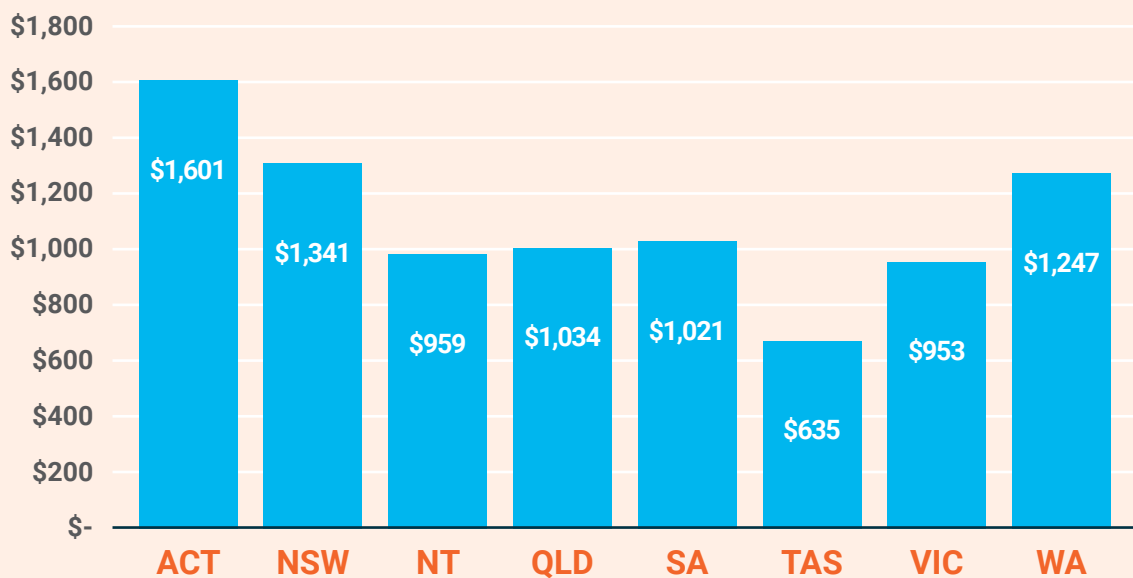
At a national level, public schools are, on average, investing less than half what private schools are investing in school infrastructure. The investment gap between the public and private sectors in 2023 alone was \$5.4 billion.

The inequity is exacerbated by the absence of federal funding for public schools, cut by the Turnbull Government in 2017.

Capital investment at a state and territory level is inconsistent and varies significantly between jurisdictions.

The chart below shows how this jurisdictional lottery plays out – students in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and Western Australia have received up to double the investment of students in Tasmania over the last decade and up to 30% more per student than those in Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory.<sup>xxvii</sup>

**Public schools – state/territory government capital investment 2014-2023 per student annual average<sup>xxviii</sup>**



*“Without a significant change to how we prioritise infrastructure investment, the projected increase of assets in poor or very poor condition will more than double over the next 20 years.”<sup>xxix</sup>*

*A 20-year Infrastructure Plan for South Australian public education and care, Government of South Australia*

*“Educational infrastructure impacts the ability of schools to attract and retain quality teachers and it can limit a school’s ability to promote itself as a quality institution to local families.”<sup>xxx</sup>*

*Commonwealth Department of Education*

*“Educational infrastructure is an important determinant of student outcomes. The quality of school facilities can influence student attendance, attainment and behaviour. The quality of facilities not only impacts students but also has an impact on the motivation and ability of teachers to instruct their students successfully.”<sup>xxxi</sup>*

*Commonwealth Department of Education*

## **Key questions**

- VIII** What impact do ageing or outdated classrooms and learning environments have on student engagement, wellbeing and achievement?
- IX** What evidence or examples are there for how physical school environments positively or negatively impact staff effectiveness, motivation, wellbeing, engagement, job satisfaction and retention?
- X** Are there examples of where school infrastructure upgrades have had a tangible positive impact on student engagement, motivation and achievement?

## 5.



## Preparing every child for a rapidly changing world

For young people to succeed in the 21st century, schools need to equip them with the skills, knowledge and capabilities to navigate a complex world being reshaped by technology and globalisation.

Alongside traditional subject knowledge, students need to be skilled in critical and creative thinking, problem solving, collaboration and teamwork. They need both digital and technological literacy and the capacity to learn and adapt in the face of emerging technologies.

Completing Year 12 is more essential than ever. More than nine out of ten new jobs expected to be created over the next decade will require post-secondary qualifications.<sup>xxxii</sup>

A key goal of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement is to lift the Year 12 completion rate by 7.5 percentage points by 2030. Achieving this would significantly increase the number of students undertaking Years 10 to 12 in public schools by around 45,000 each year.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Improving Year 12 completion rates requires physical and technology infrastructure that supports strong student engagement, diverse pathways and a full curriculum. Schools need to be able to support students at risk of disengagement, including through the provision of a comprehensive vocational education and training pathway to Year 12 completion. Investment in vocational learning spaces and equipment is necessary to ensure that schools can provide a full range of options to senior secondary students.

Schools must also be able to accommodate career counselling, mentoring and wellbeing services that help students stay connected through the final years of schooling.

Children in rural and remote areas need access to a wider range of senior secondary academic subjects and vocational programs to lift completion rates, which are significantly lower than in cities.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In the 2025 State of Our Schools survey only 30% of public school principals at outer regional schools said that they could offer the full curriculum to their students, along with 26% of principals at remote public schools. Just 8% of very remote public schools are able to offer a full curriculum to their students.



## Case study – Adelaide Botanic High School

Adelaide Botanic High School is South Australia's first vertical secondary school. The building's purpose-built design has shifted learning from something contained, to something dynamic and connected.

The school has dedicated wellbeing spaces that many students use. In these spaces, students are supported by either a youth worker or wellbeing leader.

"Our spaces are designed to support the diverse needs of all students, including those who are neurodivergent," Principal Sarah Chambers says.

"The design includes smaller retreat areas where students and staff can step away from the main learning environment when

it becomes overwhelming, while still feeling connected to others."

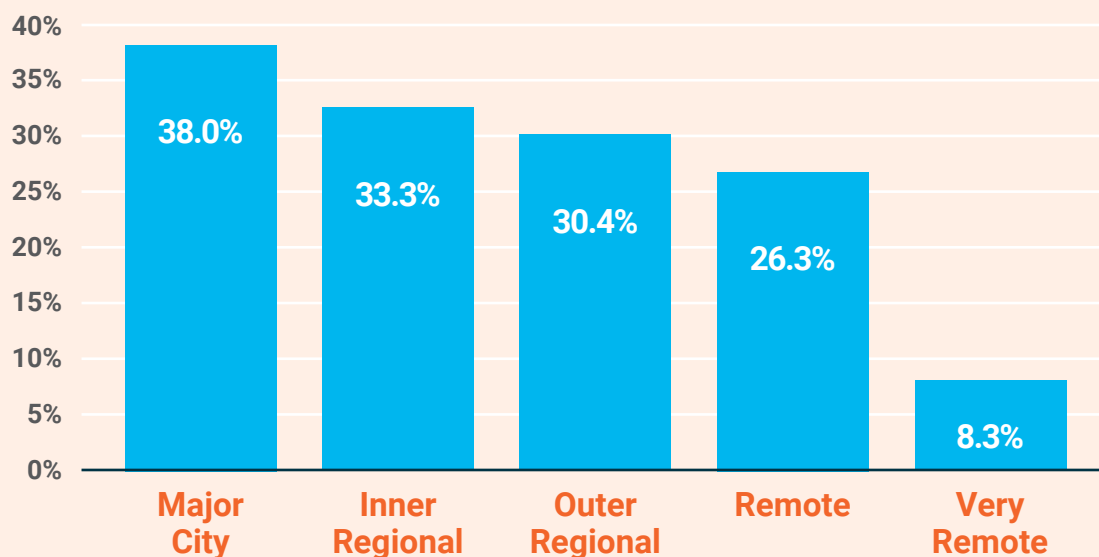
The school's specialist labs, creative studios, open collaboration zones and quiet nooks all support different ways of thinking, while integrated technology ensures innovation is part of everyday learning.

Students can move from a science laboratory into a design studio or from a collaborative space into a performance area to present their work.

"These transitions mirror the ways knowledge and skills intersect in the real world," says Chambers.

"The result is a kind of learning that feels more authentic, applied and future-focused, something that could not happen in a traditional classroom only environment."

### Principals – School infrastructure allows us to offer all subjects/curriculum learning areas<sup>xxxv</sup>



#### Key questions

- XI What are the priority infrastructure investments needed to ensure that public schools can prepare students for positive post school transitions to employment or study?
- XII How can the infrastructure and equipment required to offer a full curriculum, including a full range of academic and vocational pathways be made accessible to all students?

## 6.



# A lack of national coordination & funding

Over the last 13 years the Commonwealth and state and territory governments have moved to a recurrent school funding architecture that includes shared goals and objectives, national reporting and coordinated investment.

However, there is no equivalent framework for capital infrastructure. There is no national strategy for future-ready public schools, no shared standards and no national investment.

There is also no information on the adequacy of public school infrastructure across the country.

## A history of investment

The Commonwealth historically has played an important role in providing infrastructure funding for public schools. That funding was first delivered in the 1960s to public and private schools with capital grants for science laboratories and equipment and libraries. In 1972, the Commonwealth added a general capital grants component.

During the period 1987 to 1997, the Commonwealth contributed, on average, 32% of the funding for school infrastructure in public schools, according to a Department of Education analysis.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In 2009, Commonwealth capital funding for public schools was merged with

recurrent funding into a single funding stream.

Under the Rudd and Gillard governments, the Commonwealth also provided the landmark \$16 billion Building the Education Revolution program for public and private schools, \$2.5 billion in funding for Trades Training Centres and \$2.5 billion for the installation and maintenance of digital infrastructure.

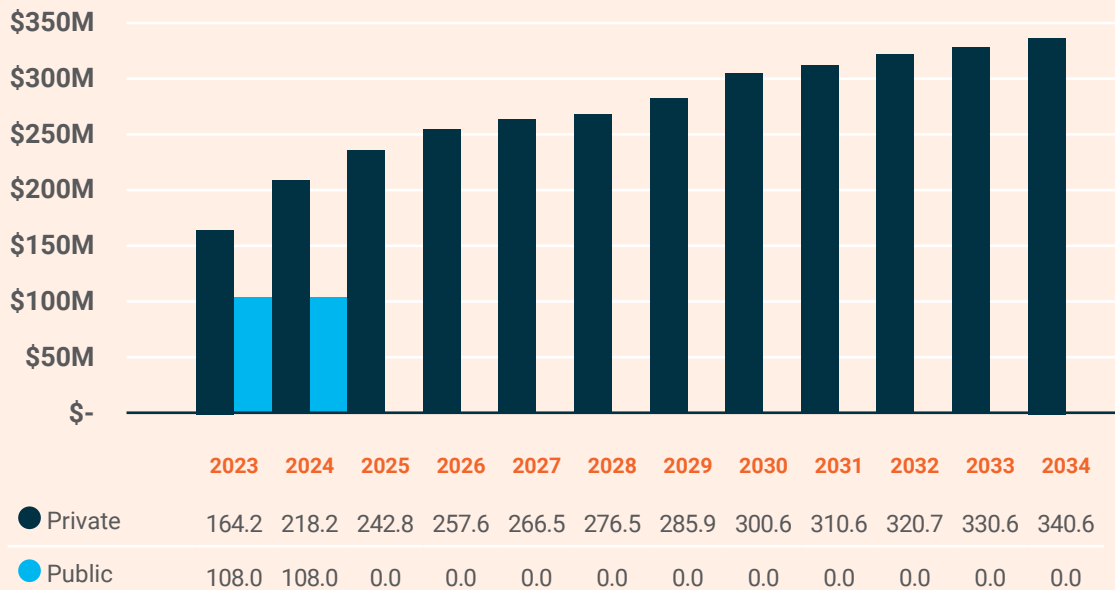
State and territory governments also received a combined stream of recurrent and capital funding for public schools. That came to an end in 2017 when the Turnbull Government directed all school funding for public schools towards a recurrent investment target.

The Albanese Government restored a public school capital fund for 2023/24, but it was a one-off \$215.8 million investment.

State and territory governments have in recent years called for the return of a permanent Commonwealth capital fund for public schools, arguing that they should not have to “go it alone”.

Private schools will receive \$2.93 billion in capital funding from the Commonwealth between 2025 and 2034, according to Department of Education estimates.<sup>xxxvii</sup> No allocation for public schools is budgeted for.

### Commonwealth capital expenditure 2023-2034<sup>xxxviii</sup>



*“After the Liberals cut almost a billion dollars from public school building programs, there hasn’t been recurrent Commonwealth funding for public school facilities since 2017. The standard of school campuses and facilities is a clear indication of the deep inequities between Australian school systems.”*

*Labor’s Plan To Help Our Schoolkids  
Bounce Back 2022*

*“At present, a comprehensive picture of the adequacy of school infrastructure in Australia is not available. There are significant gaps in the availability and consistency of data across jurisdictions and sectors.”*

*Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs,  
December 1999*

### Key questions

- XIII What are the consequences of having no national strategy or funding for public school infrastructure?
- XIV Is there value in Australia having a national agreement for school infrastructure similar to the Better and Fairer School Agreement that exists for recurrent funding? What aims and targets should that agreement include?

## 7.



# A changing role for public schools

Public schools are increasingly being relied on as community hubs providing services beyond traditional teaching and learning.

This is in response to the rising needs of students and to capitalise on the benefits for children and families of providing a continuum of services and supports in the one place.

It also reflects the limited availability of health, family and disability services in communities experiencing high levels of social and economic disadvantage.

Models such as full service schools, integrated family and early childhood services and the Thriving Kids national initiative are predicated on an expanded foundational support and early intervention role for public schools.

Under a full service model, schools provide more health and wellbeing services on site such as nurses, speech therapists and counsellors. Before and after school programs, adult learning and family support programs can also be offered.

The implementation of the full service model in communities experiencing social and economic disadvantage was strongly recommended by the Expert Panel that conducted a review of the school system in 2023 and is being trialled in several schools in Western Australia.

This integrated service model has been proven internationally to be an effective approach in improving students' school readiness, engagement and motivation. New South Wales is in the process of co-locating 100 public pre-schools with primary schools<sup>xxxix</sup> and the Commonwealth has signed agreements with the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria to build preschools "on or near" existing public school sites through its Building Early Education Fund.<sup>xl</sup>

## Thriving Kids

Thriving Kids is a new initiative of governments to provide a national system of supports for children aged eight or under with developmental delays and/or autism and their families.

Schools have been identified as one of the places where these support services will be delivered by trained professionals who may include occupational therapists, speech pathologists, physiotherapists, audiologists and psychologists.

The first state services are due to be delivered from October 2026 with a full rollout by January 1, 2028.

## The infrastructure required

Most schools were not designed for these expanded roles. Principals and teachers report a lack dedicated spaces for allied health services and family support along with the administration facilities, waiting rooms and secure zones for after-hours and community use.

While services under the Thriving Kids initiative are due to be delivered later this year there has been no commitments to infrastructure upgrades in public schools.

### Key questions

- XV How are the roles that schools are being asked to play in local communities changing, and how is the potential benefit changing roles influenced by current school infrastructure?
- XVI What are the infrastructure requirements needed to support the implementation of full service school models and the Thriving Kids initiative?



## 8.



# Climate change & environmental resilience

Extreme heat, storms, flooding, and bushfire risk are increasingly affecting school operations.

Public schools need buildings and facilities that can withstand these hazards and minimise disruptions to learning. This includes resilient building materials, improved drainage and flood mitigation and bushfire-resistant design and construction.

But infrastructure resilience varies widely, leaving some communities more exposed than others.

Principals report that many schools lack adequate cooling and heating, shading, ventilation, and green space.

There is no national plan to build and redevelop schools to increase their environmental resilience.

## Improving energy efficiency and reducing emissions

Energy-efficient school infrastructure is essential to reduce operating costs, lower emissions and support the transition to net zero greenhouse gas emissions.

Future-ready public schools require renewable energy systems with battery storage, efficient heating, cooling and insulation in all buildings and smart energy management systems. Building designs must maximise natural light, airflow and ventilation and minimise heating and cooling requirements.

Right now, there is no way of knowing how many public schools are effectively prepared for a sustainable future with little or no data available from state or territory governments beyond the numbers of schools benefiting from the limited roll out of initiatives such as solar panels.

### Key questions

**XVII** What upgrades, technologies and design approaches are needed to improve energy efficiency in public schools across the nation and how should these be funded?

**XVIII** How prepared are schools to withstand the impacts of climate change and what standards, monitoring and investments are required to ensure an effective approach, particularly in high risk communities?

# Terms of reference

*Schools for Our Future: A national inquiry into Australia's public school infrastructure needs*

1.

## Purpose of the inquiry

To examine the current state of public school infrastructure across all jurisdictions, assess future needs in light of demographic, technological, and pedagogical trends, and recommend policy and funding reforms to ensure safe, inclusive, and future-ready learning environments for every child.

2.

## Scope of the inquiry

The inquiry will consider:

### The importance of infrastructure



Australian and international evidence on the relationship between school infrastructure and:

- a) Student outcomes (academic achievement, attendance, engagement, motivation, behaviour and wellbeing).
- b) Principal, teacher and staff effectiveness, motivation, wellbeing, engagement, job satisfaction, retention and career intentions.

### The condition and safety of public school facilities



The physical condition and adequacy of classrooms, amenities, facilities and digital infrastructure in public schools.



The extent to which current school facilities support modern teaching and learning, including a full range of academic and vocational pathways as well as student wellbeing, inclusion and belonging.



Whether schools meet sustainability, safety, accessibility and compliance standards and are adequately maintained.

### Future needs



Projected enrolment growth, demographic trends and expected changes in the student population.

- The future infrastructure requirements of public schools to meet complex and diverse student needs and successfully prepare students for the workforce or further study.
- The integration of technology into teaching and learning and future technology requirements for public schools.
- Climate resilience and sustainability requirements and ways to improve the energy efficiency of schools.

## Equity and inclusion

- School infrastructure gaps in low-SES, regional, remote, Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Capital investments that would help schools improve the education and support of students with additional needs and increase family and community engagement, e.g. full service schools.
- Requirements to ensure public schools are inclusive and culturally safe.

## Funding

- Current and projected capital expenditure in public schools by state and territory governments and the Commonwealth.
- The long term investment strategies required to ensure every child learns in a safe, modern and well-resourced school.
- The educational, economic and social benefits of an increased investment in public school infrastructure.

## Membership

The inquiry will be chaired by former AEU and ACTU president Sharan Burrow AC. The Deputy Chair will be former AEU Deputy President and NSW Teachers Federation president Maurie Mulheron.

## Consultation

### The inquiry will consult with:

- Public school principals, teachers, education support personnel and families.
- State and territory governments and education agencies.
- Education stakeholders, unions, community and not-for-profit organisations, researchers, youth and student bodies.
- Organisations representing Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, rural and remote Australians, young people experiencing disadvantage and students with disability.

## Reporting

The inquiry will report in late 2026.

# Endnotes

- i Bruce D. Baker, David Knight, Does Money Matter in Education? Third Edition, 2025, Albert Shanker Institute, p.41
- ii Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia, 2024
- iii Australian Education Union, 2025 State of Our Schools survey, unpublished data
- iv Australian Bureau of Statistics, Population Projections, Australia, 2017-2066
- v AEU State of Our Schools survey, 2025
- vi Australian Education Union, The Building Divide in Australian Schools: How Capital Funding Fuels Educational Inequity, 2026, p.5
- vii Gonski, D., et.al, Review of Funding for Schooling—Final Report, Australian Government, 2011, p.92
- viii Institute for Social Science Research 2013, Final Report, The Impact of School Design, Infrastructure and Refurbishment on Educational Outcomes, prepared by M O’Flaherty, N Kapelle, M Western & M Haynes
- ix Australian Education Union, 2025 State of Our Schools survey, unpublished data.
- x Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, National Report on Schooling, Students with Disability 2024.
- xi Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority School Profile Dataset and National Report on Schooling in Australia
- xii AEU State of Our Schools survey, 2025
- xiii Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, School Profile 2024
- xiv Ibid.
- xv Productivity Commission (2022) Review of the National School Reform Agreement: study report, Productivity Commission, Australian Government, pp.74-75, cited in Commonwealth Department of Education, Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel’s Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System, 2023, p.83
- xvi Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2011, Research into the connection between built learning spaces and student outcomes, Paper no. 22, Literature Review, prepared by J Blackmore, D Bateman, J Loughlin, J O’Mara & G Aranda
- xvii Biasi, B., Lafortune, J., & Schönholzer, D. (2024). What Works and for Whom?: Effectiveness and Efficiency of School Capital Investments across the U.S. IZA - Institute of Labor Economics. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep57138?seq=1>
- xviii AEU, 2025 State of Our Schools, unpublished survey data
- xix AEU State of Our Schools survey, 2025
- xx ACARA School profile dataset & National report on schooling in Australia

- xxi Wilson, J and Rowsell, B, Schools in “poor” condition under Labor, Media Release, December 21, 2025 <https://vic.liberal.org.au/news/2025-12-20-one-in-five-schools-in-poor-condition-under-labor>
- xxii Langbroek, JP, Classrooms crumble under Labor Media Release, August 7, 2025 <https://statements.qld.gov.au/statements/103268>
- xxiii Thompson, H and Hastie, H, WA public schools get \$11.3m boost to fix crumbling infrastructure, October 14, 2025
- xxiv Government of South Australia, A 20-year Infrastructure Plan for South Australian public education and care, p.8
- xxv Ibid. p.7
- xxvi ACARA School Finance dataset 2009-2023
- xxvii Ibid.
- xxviii Ibid.
- xxix Government of South Australia, A 20-year Infrastructure Plan for South Australian public education and care, p.8
- xxx Commonwealth Department of Education, Hot Topics, Senate Estimates Brief, October 2022, p.207
- xxxi Ibid. p.207
- xxxii Jobs and Skills Australia, Employment projections for the decade ahead, <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/towards-national-jobs-and-skills-roadmap-summary/employment-projections-for-the-decade-ahead>
- xxxiii Extrapolated from ABS Schools, Year 10 to 12 full-time apparent retention rates by school affiliation, 2014 to 2024, retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release#retention-rates>
- xxxiv ACARA, National report on schooling in Australia, Year 12 certification rates, 2022
- xxxv AEU State of Our Schools survey, 2025
- xxxvi Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Capital Matters: an evaluation of the Commonwealth’s Capital Grants Programme for schools, December 1999
- xxxvii Funding projections as of July 14th, 2025 obtained from the Commonwealth Department for Education under FOI
- xxxviii ACARA Finance Dataset 2009-2023
- xxxix <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/early-learning/public-preschools>
- xl Australian Government, Building Early Education Fund - Department of Education, <https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/about/building-early-education-fund>

© AEU 2026

Authorised by Nicole Calnan,  
Federal Secretary,

**Australian Education Union**

120 Clarendon Street, Southbank,  
Victoria, Australia 3006



[schoolsforourfuture.org.au](https://schoolsforourfuture.org.au)