



**CONSERVATION
COUNCIL** ACT REGION

Submission on the ACT Education Corporate Sponsorship Policy

Prepared by: Conservation Council ACT Region

Date: 02 July, 2025

To: Education Directorate, ACT Government

About Us:

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the leading environmental advocacy organisation and hub for community groups in Canberra. Our mission is to protect nature and create a safe climate in the ACT and region. Since 1981 we have been at the centre of the region's most important wins for wildlife, bushland and communities, encompassing over 40 member groups.

Executive Summary:

Schools are vital places in our society - providing children a safe space to learn, prepare for their future and play an active role in society. We call for the inclusion of fossil fuel companies - coal, oil and gas companies in the list of categories that are prohibited from sponsorship in schools through the Corporate Sponsorship Policy. Such a ban is vital in ensuring our schools provide excellent, fair and equitable education in a safe and supported environment, in line with the Directorate's purpose.

Sponsorships by fossil fuel companies are fundamentally against the Directorate's purpose due to the role these companies have played in driving anthropogenic climate change and obstructing climate action. Fossil fuel companies use sponsorships as a means to gain social license without which they will not have the social acceptance, investment or work force to continue operating. Furthermore fossil fuel companies use funding to delay climate action, spread misinformation and discredit climate science. We cannot allow such players and their funds into our classrooms, polluting the minds of our children and young people. We also fear that fossil fuel companies will use sponsorships to prevent our children and young people from actively engaging in civil society movements that have been successful in drawing the world's attention to the need for urgent climate action.

The ACT has long been a national leader in climate action. Our survey shows that the ACT parent community is concerned about the harmful effects of fossil fuel sponsorships in schools and is ready to back the government in its ban of fossil fuel sponsorships.

Finally, we strongly urge the government to include all mechanisms of sponsorships - donations, gifts, grants, competitions and awards, in its ban. These mechanisms have been successfully used by fossil fuel companies to engage with students. Excluding these from this review and subsequently from the ban leaves the door wide open for fossil fuel interests to continue perpetrating harm in our society.

Inclusion of Fossil Fuel Companies in Prohibited Category

Sponsorships in schools are viewed as mutually beneficial arrangements providing financial benefits to the school while building support for businesses and organisations that provide sponsorship. The discussion paper provided by the Education Directorate rightly identifies that such sponsorships should be aligned with the values, purpose and goals of the school, the Directorate and the ACT Government.

In our submission, we specifically call for the **inclusion of fossil fuel companies - coal, oil and gas companies in the list of categories that are prohibited from sponsorship in the Corporate Sponsorship Policy.**

The reasons for calling for such an inclusion are:

1. Fossil fuel companies, by their very nature, are not aligned with the values, goals and purpose of schools, the Directorate and the ACT Government.
2. The bad faith use of sponsorships by fossil fuel companies to gain social license and spread disinformation about climate change
3. The use of sponsorship to potentially discourage children and young people from advocating for stronger climate action
4. Strong support from the community for including fossil fuel companies in the prohibited category

1. Misalignment in values, purpose and goals

The ACT Education Directorate states its mission is to “to offer excellent, fair and equitable education. We want all students to feel safe, valued and supported to thrive.”¹ Such an education, delivered in a safe and supported environment is crucial for our children and young people to become individuals who reach their potential and are fully contributing members of our society. However, the presence of fossil fuel companies and their interests directly contradicts the Directorate’s mission, specifically its responsibility for providing a safe environment in which our children and young people can thrive.

¹ <https://www.act.gov.au/directorates-and-agencies/education-directorate#What-we-do>

Over two decades ago, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) - the United Nation's (UN) leading international body for assessing climate change, found that as the dominant form of the world's energy (86%) fossil fuels account for about 75% of anthropogenic carbon emissions.² The IPCC has repeatedly pointed out that fossil fuels are the primary drivers of anthropogenic climate change.³ Through their operations, fossil fuel companies have set in motion serious, irreversible, climatic disruption that we are experiencing now and will continue to do so, well into our future. To have companies that have endangered the future of our children and young people present in what should be a safe environment for our children, is simply wrong.

Studies have shown that a majority of children and young people across the world suffer from climate anxiety.⁴ In Australia, researchers have found that climate anxiety causes “feelings of fear, overwhelm, worry, distress, hopelessness and anger; PTSD; depression; anxiety; phobias; panic disorder; sleep disturbances; attachment disorders; learning difficulties; substance abuse; shock and trauma symptoms; adjustment problems; behavioural problems; and, suicidal thinking.”⁵ The discussion paper provided by the Education Directorate rightly identifies that “consideration needs to be given to how educational benefits are achieved and any potential risks to students associated with sponsorship opportunities”⁶. Allowing sponsorship from fossil fuel companies is providing government permission for companies that cause such grave danger to the wellbeing of our children and young people to be present where our children should be safe - at school.

2. Gaining Social License Through Sponsorships

The IPCC has repeatedly called for a shift away from fossil fuels to cleaner, greener, renewable energy sources including wind and solar. Recent investigations show that fossil fuel companies have undertaken a systematic, global campaign using a variety of strategies including the

² IPCC, 2001: Climate Change 2001: the Scientific Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Third Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. J.T. Houghton, Y. Ding, D.J. Griggs, M. Noguer, P.J. van der Linden, X. Dai, K. Maskell, and C.A. Johnson, (eds.). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

³ IPCC, 2023: Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, pp. 1-34, doi: 10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647.001

⁴ Hickman, C., Marks, E., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, R.E., Mayall, E.E., Wray, B., Mellor, C. and Van Susteren, L., 2021. Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5(12), pp.e863-e873.

⁵ Godden, N.J., Farrant, B.M., Yallup Farrant, J., Heyink, E., Carot Collins, E., Burgemeister, B., Tabeshfar, M., Barrow, J., West, M., Kieft, J. and Rothwell, M., 2021. Climate change, activism, and supporting the mental health of children and young people: Perspectives from Western Australia. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 57(11), pp.1759-1764.

⁶ ACT Education Directorate Corporate Sponsorship Policy Discussion Paper, ACT Government, available at https://hdp-au-prod-app-act-yoursay-files.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/3817/4769/8384/ACT_Education_Directorate_Corporate_Sponsorship_Policy_-_Discussion_Paper.pdf accessed on 26 June, 2025

spread of disinformation to discredit climate science, to slow climate action, specifically the rapid transition to renewable energy.⁷ Communications collective CommsDeclare has found that in Australia, fossil fuel companies sponsor more than 60 school programs nationwide, providing one-sided information about climate change and ignoring the benefits of moving to renewable energy sources.⁸

Fossil fuel-sponsored school programs falsely position fossil fuels as the future of energy, while casting doubt over climate science.⁹ Such programs are a means for fossil fuel companies to continue maintaining social licence while recruiting a new generation of advocates for their cause. And we know that social license is key to any industry's success - building community acceptance, investment and workforce for its operation.

Acknowledging the harm in legitimising fossil fuel interests through sponsorships, educational institutions are beginning to drop fossil fuel partnerships and programs¹⁰. As the Australian leader in climate action, the ACT Government is already taking steps to ban fossil fuel advertising in sporting venues through its The Environment Protection (Fossil Fuel Company Advertising) Amendment Bill 2024 (ACT). Excluding fossil fuel companies' sponsorships in schools is another important step to stop insidious strategies by fossil fuel companies to gain social license.

3. The use of sponsorship to potentially discourage children and young people from advocating for stronger climate action.

Climate advocacy movements such as "School Strike 4 Climate" driven by children and young people have brought climate change to the forefront of policymakers' attention in Australia and across the world. Such advocacy programs have also been shown to improve resilience in children and young people.¹¹

A study conducted in the US, UK, Australia and Canada has found that sponsorships in universities are being used by fossil fuel interest groups as a strategy to delay climate action.¹² Providing sponsorships in schools could similarly be used by these bad faith actors to prevent our children and young people from actively engaging in their future, from being fully informed members of society - from advocating for faster climate action.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/aug/08/fossil-fuel-industry-using-disinformation-campaign-to-slow-green-transition-says-un>

⁸ <https://commsdeclare.org/2022/08/26/stem-education-fossil-fuels-trojan-horse/>

⁹ Ibid

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<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/sep/16/university-drops-santos-branding-of-kids-science-roadshow-after-climate-concerns-raised>

¹¹ Godden, N.J., Farrant, B.M., Yallup Farrant, J., Heyink, E., Carot Collins, E., Burgemeister, B., Tabeshfar, M., Barrow, J., West, M., Kieft, J. and Rothwell, M., 2021. Climate change, activism, and supporting the mental health of children and young people: Perspectives from Western Australia. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 57(11), pp.1759-1764.

¹² Hiltner, S., Eaton, E., Healy, N., Scerri, A., Stephens, J.C. and Supran, G., 2024. Fossil fuel industry influence in higher education: A review and a research agenda. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 15(6), p.e904.

4. Strong support from the community for including fossil fuel companies in the prohibited category

A recent study conducted by the Conservation Council ACT Region with communications collective CommsDeclare has found that a majority of parents in the ACT support “demands for an Australian first restriction in the ACT on coal, oil and gas companies advertising or sponsoring activities and programs for their children.”¹³ Our study has found that ACT parents are concerned that fossil fuel sponsorships will provide incomplete and biased information about energy use and renewables. Such strong community support makes it clear that the ACT community is ready for the government to once again take its position as a climate leader and ban fossil fuel sponsorships in schools.

Extending the Scope of this Review

We note with concern that donations, gifts, grants, competitions and awards are outside of the scope of this review. There are many instances of fossil fuel companies using such programs in schools. The Ampol Best Allrounder Award and the BHP Foundation Science and Engineering Award are two examples of long-running, national-level school award programs run by fossil fuel companies. Leaving any mechanism, including popular ones like donations, gifts, grants, competitions and awards out of the scope of this review and more broadly, from exclusion of sponsorship will leave the door open for fossil fuel companies to continue their insidious campaign to gain social license and delay climate action. For this reason, we call for a total exclusion of sponsorships by fossil fuel companies, in all forms.