

Public school kids have less space than NSW prisoners to play

Surging enrolments have seen the playground space per student shrink in many public schools, giving some Sydney kids less space to play than prisoners. Is your school on the map?

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Prison inmates have more room in their cells in NSW than schoolchildren have to play at lunchtime per student in some NSW government school playgrounds as enrolments surge.

Experts warn tiny playground spaces affect childhood obesity and hinder games and socialisation while they also exacerbate poor classroom behaviour because students cannot run off excess energy during break times.

Students at Parramatta High School this year have just 1.14sqm of play space available after the 2.1sqm of personal space in the playground was almost halved between 2019 and this year. Enrolments went up by 243 students over that period.

Ultimo Public School has the next lowest amount of playground space with just 2.03sqm per student followed by the also recently constructed inner city high school which has just 3.48sqm for every kid.

The figures were revealed in the NSW Upper House documents under questioning from Labor's Courtney Houssos.

Opposition Education spokeswoman Prue Car said the playground shortage was thanks to overcrowded schools in parts of Sydney where demountables were robbing children of play areas.

“Having space to run around at school keeps children happy and healthy, but too many school playgrounds are either overcrowded or overrun with demountables,” she said.

“The NSW Government should be building all schools with open space and playgrounds. High-rise schools with no access to grass or playgrounds are a recipe for disaster.”

This year 39 schools have less than the 10sqm of playground space per student as recommended in Department of Education guidelines and 29 schools in NSW have less play space per student than the average 8.71sqm size of a prison cell.

But a Department spokesman said play space guidelines were not an “indication of entitlement” when it came to playground size and said some schools used nearby parks.

“The Educational Facilities Standards and Guidelines are not a minimum standard or an indication of entitlement,” he said.

“Parramatta High School has a longstanding agreement for unrestricted use of Parramatta Park oval and parklands next to the school.”

It is not just inner city schools with surging enrolments feeling the playground pinch, but also recently constructed schools like Riverbank Public in The Ponds in Sydney’s west.

Charles Sturt University physical activity expert Associate Professor Brendon Hyndman, and Play Australia Board member, said small playgrounds deprived kids of the broader opportunities to hone physical, social and thinking skills through play.

“Natural features are often limited within small playground spaces and they are really important,” he said.

“Children need sufficient space for doing so they can take moderate level risk, undertake play challenges and extend themselves physically,” he said

School name	Students	Play space per student
Parramatta High School	1,209	1.14 sqm
Ultimo Public School	450	2.03 sqm
Inner Sydney High School	597	3.48 sqm
Woollahra Public School	695	4.52 sqm
Balmain Public School	355	4.66 sqm
Cammeraygal High School	876	4.92 sqm
Mosman High School	1,020	5.18 sqm
Riverbank Public School	2,035	5.52 sqm
Campsie Public School	622	5.72 sqm
Neutral Bay Public School	815	5.82 sqm

School name	Students	Play space per student
Bourke Street Public School	447	6.13 sqm
Bellevue Hill Public School	530	6.22 sqm
Northern Beaches Secondary College Balgowlah Boys	1,212	6.33 sqm
Annandale North Public School	394	6.39 sqm
Chatswood Public School	1,108	6.42 sqm
Ashtonfield Public School	505	6.58 sqm
Artarmon Public School	1,216	6.64 sqm
Anzac Park Public School	827	6.69 sqm
Crown Street Public School	335	7.46 sqm
Sydney Secondary College Leichhardt Campus	920	7.65 sqm
Darlinghurst Public School	288	7.88 sqm
Homebush Public School	502	8.16 sqm
Manly Village Public School	595	8.22 sqm
Sydney Boys High School	1,204	8.42 sqm
Bankstown Girls High School	515	8.43 sqm
Coogee Public School	527	8.51 sqm
Meadowbank Public School	567	8.6 sqm
Kensington Public School	424	8.62 sqm

Australian Health Promotion Association chief Paul Klarenaar told a parliamentary committee in May lack of playground space was not good for concentrating in the classroom.

“Logically, insufficient physical activity opportunities or space will result in insufficient academic outcomes as well as greater incidental opportunity for conflict because of insufficient space,” he said.

University of Sydney’s childhood obesity expert Louise Baur said playgrounds were important because “children need space for running and playing and kicking balls.”

She said it was more important in light of Covid lockdowns, citing studies conducted overseas which found more children were sedentary.

“In the UK, in the US, UK, Europe, China, you had kids, particularly the younger kids were more affected and were less physically active,” she said.

