

ACT Government independent inquiry into literacy and numeracy performance in ACT public schools

February 2024



**ACT Council of
Parents & Citizens
Associations**

The parent voice on public education

ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations is the representative body for Parent & Citizen associations in the ACT. Council represents parents and carers in ACT public schools.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands and waters where we live, work and learn, and pay my respects to elders past, present, and future.

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Executive summary

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) is a non-profit, non-government representative organisation whose objectives are to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliate parent & citizens associations (P&Cs) and make representations to government on behalf of parents and carers across all ACT public schools.

This submission is based on engagement with our member P&Cs, the ongoing business of Council, and our recent Election Priorities Survey.

Literacy and numeracy are foundational skills and parents consider good literacy and numeracy outcomes a key component of their children's education. Council conducted a survey of parents in late 2023 to determine issues that are important to parents. Improved literacy and numeracy outcomes was the second most important issue.

Many aspects of education provision impact on literacy and numeracy outcomes, including workforce, school offerings, use of data, student support and parent engagement. Our submission discusses these further and provides recommendations that we believe will lift the performance of ACT public schools in literacy and numeracy.

Should the committee require clarification or more information please contact our office on 6241 5759 or via email: contact@actparents.org.au

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

At a system level ensure that all schools are supported to be fully staffed (or where this is not possible that staffing shortages are spread evenly across the system) so that all schools can provide a high-quality educational experience for all students.

Recommendation 2

Provide incentives for experienced staff to take up positions at schools in greater need to ensure that there is a balanced spread of experience at all schools.

Recommendation 3

That additional funding is provided to implement a consistent approach to literacy and numeracy teaching across ACT public schools and that the approach adopted is based on the current evidence and efficacy of the approach, supported by independent research.

Recommendation 4

That consistent assessment tools be implemented to enable schools to monitor student progress in literacy and numeracy in order to provide interventions and support where necessary.

Recommendation 5

That schools are resourced to provide the support required for all students to achieve in literacy and numeracy, by providing multi-tiered systems of support, even if this means bringing in specialist teachers/implementing a specialist program. Schools should not refer students to after school private tutoring to get the support they need to learn to read.

Recommendation 6

That schools have high expectations for all students and do not teach to a minimum standard. This includes ensuring all students are supported to reach their potential and that extension is provided to gifted and talented students.

Recommendation 7

Schools should encourage parents and suitable volunteers where available to come back into schools to support literacy and numeracy in the classroom, particularly in the early years.

Recommendation 8

There should be centrally developed resources for parents which explain the approach to teaching of literacy and numeracy, tips on what parents can do to support literacy and numeracy learning at home, what parents should expect to see in terms of their child's progress and what to do if they think their child is not progressing as they should.

Introduction

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) is a non-profit, non-government representative organisation whose objectives are to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliate parent & citizens associations (P&Cs) and make representations to government on behalf of parents and carers across all ACT public schools.

Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry on the important issue of literacy and numeracy in ACT public schools. Council considers that literacy and numeracy are foundational skills and that proficiency in these areas is an important aspect of a child's education. Without proficient skills in these areas students' participation in the broader curriculum and life generally can be negatively impacted.

A recent survey of parents, undertaken by Council, revealed that literacy and numeracy outcomes for students is currently one of the most important issues for parents in public schools. Parents also want more support for students with learning difficulties.

Council acknowledges that the issue of literacy and numeracy outcomes is complex and involves many aspects of how schools operate, not just the way literacy and numeracy is taught. Our submission therefore covers aspects of the education system broadly that we believe contribute to literacy and numeracy success.

Council is happy to meet with members of the expert panel to discuss any of the points raised in our submission.

Should you require clarification or more information please contact our office on 6241 5759 or via email: contact@actparents.org.au

Background

Parents rightly expect that when they send their children to school they will obtain the literacy and numeracy skills needed to be successful learners and to participate in society. Council has heard concerns from some parents that their children have not received the support necessary to develop their literacy and numeracy skills at school. The issue of literacy outcomes in ACT public schools has been highlighted over the past year in the media, due to the release of several research reports and a campaign by the ACT Alliance for Evidence Based Education.

At Council's General Meeting on 28 March 2023 the ACT Alliance for Evidence based Education delivered a presentation on "evidence-based literacy instruction compared with current literacy instruction in schools". This presentation occurred before the issue had attracted media attention and it raised many questions for our members, who had not seen the content before and were not sure what to make of it. It also caused some concern amongst members as the Alliance made claims that "in the ACT our [public] education system is failing when it comes to literacy" and presented the Catholic system as a better option.

Whilst Council appreciates that the Alliance aims to improve literacy outcomes for students in ACT public schools, from our perspective the comparisons the Alliance makes to the Catholic system are unhelpful. Parents should not be made to feel negatively about sending students to their local public school, especially where a choice of school is not open to them. Elevation and promotion of the Catholic system is likely to increase the rates of residualisation in public schools. Residualisation already appears to be an issue for some public schools, which is something we would encourage the ACT Government to address. Whilst acknowledging that there is room for improvement in the public school sector, we prefer an approach that focuses on lifting school capacity in our public schools to meet the learning needs of all students. We would like an equitable public school system where public schools, no matter where they are located within the ACT are of a high standard and the school of choice for local families.

On 31 May 2023 Council facilitated a presentation to our members from representatives of the ACT Education Directorate. The presentation titled "Building strong readers and writers in ACT public schools" outlined the approach to literacy education in ACT public schools. This provided our members with the opportunity to hear the current approaches to literacy teaching and ask questions. Overall, our members were pleased to hear that there was a system wide approach to literacy teaching but thought that the implementation of it was left to individual schools to interpret and deliver. Members thought that, while such an approach allowed for flexibility to respond to local school communities, it also led to inconsistencies in implementation and outcomes.

In November 2023, to help develop lobbying priorities for the 2024 ACT Election, Council launched a survey to find out what were the key issues that parents of public-school students wanted addressed. In total we received over 150 responses from parents from at least 25 different schools. The number one commitment parents wanted was for more support for students with learning difficulties and/or additional needs, followed a close second by improved literacy and numeracy outcomes. Council notes that recent media attention on this issue has

raised the profile of this issue in parents' minds but it also shows that parents are deeply concerned about the education outcomes of their children.

Discussion

Council notes that this inquiry has a strong focus on equity and to ensure that all students at ACT public schools are given the opportunity to develop the essential literacy and numeracy skills for learning and for life. Council believes that many aspects of a school impact on literacy and numeracy outcomes such as:

- Workforce issues, including a school's ability to be fully staffed and to provide relief teachers so that students have a teacher when they come to school. The level of experience of the staff, ensuring that schools have a balance of experience, is also important.
- School offerings - including the provision of specialist programs and staff (such as teacher librarians), subjects, languages and the approach to teaching literacy and numeracy. Consistency in school offerings when there is a leadership change is also important.
- How schools use data to inform their teaching.
- Student support and expectations - including the support that is offered to students that need additional support such as, but not limited to, students with dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia as well as the provision of gifted and talented programs to extend students and ensuring that all students are supported to reach their potential.
- Parent engagement – including communicating effectively with parents on students' progress and concerns.

Council believes that some of the issues could be addressed by taking a more systemic approach and that it may be appropriate to expect some degree of consistency in educational offerings across ACT public schools. Council notes that when an equity lens is applied it is clear that some of these issues impact some schools more than others. Having a more systemic approach in some areas may help address some of the inequities across the ACT public education system.

Workforce

Council knows that with the current teaching workforce shortage and other factors impacting staff availability it is a challenge for schools to be fully staffed. However, we also understand that the workforce shortage impacts schools disproportionately across the ACT. Some schools are better able to attract and retain experienced teachers and relief teachers (due to location, reputation, school leadership, school community). As several respondents to our survey noted, some schools struggle to be fully staffed which makes it difficult for students to acquire important literacy and numeracy skills. One respondent also suggested that the schools that would benefit from experienced staff are least likely to get them. It is clear that if students do not

get consistent access to a teacher, their ability to acquire literacy and numeracy skills will be impacted.

Council feels that there is a role at a system level to support/encourage/incentivise more experienced staff to take up positions at schools with greater need. Council would like teachers that take up this opportunity to commit to a medium term to enable cultural change and provide mentorship of less experienced teachers. Short-term parachuting in of experienced staff is only a band aid solution. To enable long-term change the system needs to support a balanced spread of staff across all schools.

Some of the commitments that parents asked for in our 2023 survey in relation to workforce are:

“That my child would have a teacher each day. She has had months of being split due to teacher absence and no relief teachers. She is a keen student but has started not wanted to go to school because she knows she will be split and then when she’s split they do chromebooks or read or watch movies and don’t participate with the other class.”

“To attract expert teachers to xxxx, and other similar socio-economic demographic schools that need them most. Stop the passing around of highly experienced, lead teachers between schools with children who have the greatest advantage and attract these teachers into specialist roles at schools with more need.”

“Please get more teachers and relief teachers in school. I know absences can’t be avoided, but when the extended absence (in this case a needed surgery) is known of months in advance and still there is no replacement it starts impacting learning outcomes and increases the risk of school refusal.”

Recommendation 1

At a system level ensure that all schools are supported to be fully staffed (or where this is not possible that staffing shortages are spread evenly across the system) so that all schools can provide a high-quality educational experience for all students.

Recommendation 2

Provide incentives for experienced staff to take up positions at schools in greater need to ensure that there is a balanced spread of experience at all schools.

School Offerings (including teacher librarians, gifted and talented programs)

One of the implications of school autonomy is that schools can make their own decisions about the offerings they provide in terms of things such as specialist subjects, gifted and talented programs, music, arts or sports programs, language education and the staffing of specialist positions such as teacher librarians. For some schools this has enabled them to put in place a broad range of programs which are well regarded in the community. Other schools have, however, struggled to be able to resource and/or staff such programs and the school offering is more basic. Whilst Council believes that there is value in schools having some flexibility to meet the needs of their community there is currently a high variance in the diversity of offerings at ACT public schools.

We have heard concerns from parents about the inequitable access to specialist programs that some schools provide. It has been noted that schools with higher ICSEA values appear to offer more in the way of specialist programs (such as academic, sport or band programs), music, arts and languages. These public schools appear to set a desirable standard, which is not matched by all schools. Parents that live outside of the PEA for schools with such programs have expressed frustration that their children don't have the same opportunities at their local public school. Council contends the range of programs on offer impacts on the educational experience of students and contributes to variance in literacy and numeracy outcomes.

In terms of literacy and numeracy instruction, currently all ACT public schools are guided by frameworks set by the Education Directorate. However, Council understands that there is significant variability in the implementation of approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy across schools. Whilst Council appreciates that it is important that teachers are allowed to use their professional judgement to deliver programs flexibly based on their cohort of students, there could be benefit in a more consistent approach that provides more structure and guidance than what is currently the case. Council does not claim to be an expert in the approach that should be used but would be supportive of a consistent evidence-based approach to the teaching of literacy and numeracy, especially in the early years, that allows for some flexibility to respond to the individual needs of the students. This approach should be supported by independent research which considers the efficacy of the approach for all students.

Having greater consistency in educational offerings, including the specialist programs on offer and approaches to literacy and numeracy also enables schools to maintain some consistency when there are changes in school leadership. Council has heard from parents that schools can change significantly when there is a change of leadership. Although it can be a positive thing to have a fresh set of eyes review existing programs and look for improvements, it can be disruptive to the school community when established and well-regarded programs and/or approaches to learning change on what appears to be the whim of a new leadership team.

Council has lobbied for a number of years to get a teacher librarian in all public schools, but we know that this still hasn't been achieved. Council believes that teacher librarians and well-stocked libraries have the potential to positively impact on literacy outcomes. There are still public schools in the ACT without these important resources. Council questions whether lower than expected literacy performance can be attributed to the decline of teacher librarians and dedicated, well-resourced libraries. Council would suggest that the Panel may wish to look further into this issue, including how teacher librarians are used to support literacy and how many schools are still without one.

Parent asks (from our 2023 survey) in respect of school offerings include:

“Common / consistent curriculum and syllabus across public schools to reduce the postcode lottery about what students are taught.”

“Equal access to opportunities across public schools. Wealthy areas have disproportionately greater access to extra learning and facilities etc when they are the areas with the greatest capacity to meet those needs outside school. Lower SES areas need consistent access to

music, languages and art because the families there are the least likely to be able to provide those things. It cements inequality.”

“Quality of education is critical and means so much more than meeting desired NAPLAN outcomes! We need teachers, learning environments and resources that allow for a broad and rich educational experience for all children. Areas like music, art and language should be integrated into all learning, reflecting the well-established research that these help children’s education in many ways, including lifting literacy and numeracy.”

“I’m concerned by the recent media articles about inconsistency in ACT schools in their approach to reading. My daughter attends a school that does not take the codified reading approach and has fallen behind. I have spent thousands on external resources to bring her back up to speed but not everyone is in the same financial position to do so.”

“Access for every ACT public school student to a decent library maintained by a library professional.”

Recommendation 3

That additional funding is provided to implement a consistent approach to literacy and numeracy teaching across ACT public schools and that the approach adopted is based on the current evidence and efficacy of the approach, supported by independent research.

Using Data to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Outcomes

Data is an important tool in monitoring student progress. Council acknowledges that NAPLAN is only a one point in time test but as the only nationally consistent test it provides parents with insight as to how students are tracking in the key foundational skills of literacy and numeracy. We feel that in the absence of any other nationally consistent data that NAPLAN could be better supported by schools and that the data that comes from it should be used (in conjunction with other assessment data) to inform levels of support and extension needed.

Council does not support the use of NAPLAN data to produce league charts and doesn’t want to see schools teaching to the test. However, a lot of time and effort is invested into NAPLAN testing every year and it is a tool that should be used to inform student learning and to determine whether a school’s approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy are effective.

Council would like to see public schools encouraging all students to participate in NAPLAN, rather than providing an easy opt-out option (as some currently do). Council notes that generally participation rates in NAPLAN are higher amongst private/catholic schools indicating a greater support for NAPLAN testing. Some of the public schools with lower ICSEA values have participation rates too low to allow for effective comparison.

Council also think that there are opportunities for greater use of the data at a system level. There is an opportunity to identify schools that have performed well in NAPLAN and investigate what it is about their approach that has worked well and look to see if it can be applied to other schools. Conversely schools that didn’t perform as well could be looked at to see why. Council would like this process to be viewed as an opportunity for a school to learn and develop and to identify the resources they require to improve, not as a punitive process.

Whilst NAPLAN is one set of data from a point in time, we know that teachers are obtaining data on a regular basis through continuous formative assessment. Data informs practice and enables teachers to differentiate to ensure that all students are progressing in their learning.

Council considers the BASE for kindergarten an important tool to track students' progress and identify students that may need further support. To ensure its maximum effectiveness students' BASE results should be made available to year 1 teachers to ensure that support can be provided to students that need it and student progress can continue to be monitored.

We know that teachers are constantly assessing their students and think there would be benefit in having consistent tools used to gather information on literacy and numeracy progress. By having consistent tools you can also have benchmarks of where you expect students to be and how much progress you would expect to see. This can help identify students that are struggling and those that need extension and the consistent approach also allows for progress information to follow a student if they change schools. They will also enable parents to have clear information more regularly on how their children are progressing.

What we have heard from parents on data includes:

“The year 1 phonics check and screening and progress monitoring for all kids from kindy to year 2 to find those kids who are struggling and make sure all kids are progressing”

Recommendation 4

That consistent assessment tools be implemented to enable schools to monitor student progress in literacy and numeracy in order to provide interventions and support where necessary.

Supporting Students

A key part of improving literacy and numeracy is being able to identify and respond to students that need additional support. It is clear that parents expect this support to happen in schools during school time.

Council has heard of parents being told by their children's teachers that they need to seek external private tutoring so they can be taught to read. Council thinks that this is unacceptable, and that schools need to be able to support all students to obtain literacy and numeracy skills. Children with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia may need extra targeted support but this should be delivered by schools. Schools should have the primary responsibility for all students' literacy and numeracy outcomes.

The type of support should be consistent across the system for students that need it and should reflect best practice, such as a multi-tiered system of support that directs more intensive support to students that need it the most. Schools should be resourced to provide this support and to deliver any programs needed to support students with learning difficulties. We consider that oversight is needed to ensure that schools continue to resource literacy and numeracy supports as oversight from school boards has been inadequate to ensure resources have been invested to support literacy and numeracy outcomes. This could be a dedicated revenue stream within school budgets or a percentage based on identified student need. Council also contends that if

a more centralised specific approach to literacy and numeracy is adopted, funds previously allocated to schools for this purpose should be kept within schools to resource evidenced multi-tiered supports (we anticipate this includes small group programs and one on one support etc).

Furthermore, Council has heard that some parents feel that there needs to be a greater investment in gifted and talented students. Any multi-tiered system of support should occur parallel to extension opportunities for gifted and talented students. Council has heard some concerns about schools teaching to a minimum standard and not challenging all students to achieve to their potential. Overall schools should have high expectations for all students. By lifting up all students the performance of the ACT in literacy and numeracy will improve.

Parent asks from our 2023 survey about support include:

“That every child is supported appropriately to ensure they have the skills to read and write successfully.”

“That my child’s school provides proper intervention and support to children with learning difficulties/learning disabilities. That teachers have a better understanding of learning difficulties/learning disabilities and know how to support these children to ensure they finish primary school with competent reading, writing and spelling skills.”

“Better supports for students with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia & ADHD.”

“More time on numeracy and literacy in the school day for good students so they can excel - not just so everyone gets to a minimum standard.”

“Evidence based literacy programs for every student including access to evidence based intervention for all children who require it, not just the “bottom four”.”

“Currently there is little to no support for students with learning difficulties unless they also have a disability.”

Some of the parent asks relating to gifted and talented include:

“Access to specialist programs, particularly gifted and talented. My daughter needs to be stretched academically and introduced to more challenging work.”

“A dedicated gifted and talented program. It is hugely lacking in the government school system and comes down to the individual principal and socioeconomic cohort of the school. Giftedness is not something that only occurs in privileged kids, but the only options for proper support are schools in exclusive PEAs or expensive private schools.”

Recommendation 5

That schools are resourced to provide the support required for all students to achieve in literacy and numeracy, by providing multi-tiered systems of support, even if this means bringing in specialist teachers/implementing a specialist program. Schools should not refer students to after school private tutoring to get the support they need to learn to read.

Recommendation 6

That schools have high expectations for all students and do not teach to a minimum standard. This includes ensuring all students are supported to reach their potential and that extension is provided to gifted and talented students.

Parent Engagement

Literacy and numeracy outcomes are important for parents, and schools should try to harness this. Council sees discussions between parents and teachers as an opportunity for schools to engage with the parent on the approach used in the classroom, how their child is progressing and what they can do to support the student at home. When having conversations with parents, teachers should be mindful not to use teaching terminology and explain things in a way that parents can understand. Parents want clear, timely communication about where their child is up to. If there are any concerns parents want to be informed early and not find out about them in the report card.

Improved student-centred reporting to parents and carers, especially when it comes to literacy and numeracy is key. Currently most parents receive A to E reporting without comments, as a measure to reduce teacher workloads. However, this does not give parents and carers a clear indication of student progress and achievement in the crucial areas of literacy and numeracy. Parents and carers consider the identification of potential learning difficulties or needs is really important in the early years, before the gap becomes too large.

Parents also want teachers to take their concerns seriously. We have heard of parents with concerns being told their child is progressing okay, only for the parent to later find out from elsewhere that their child is in fact behind where they should be. We have also heard of teachers struggling to communicate their approach to literacy teaching with families.

A more consistent approach to literacy and numeracy teaching would allow for a suite of centrally developed resources for parents. These resources could explain the approach to teaching of literacy and numeracy, tips on what parents can do to support literacy and numeracy learning at home, what parents should expect to see in terms of their child's progress and what to do if they think their child is not progressing as they should.

Council also sees opportunities for parents to be more involved in schools, such as listening to students read. Based on feedback that we have heard it appears that parent participation in the classroom has not fully recovered following COVID lockdowns. Schools and parents got used to the COVID way of doing things and many parents feel that schools have been slow to invite them back into the classroom.

Parent comment about parent engagement from our member session literacy on 31 May 2023:

"I think we've also forgotten over COVID, we lost some of the things that parents and carers did within schools within schools, as in like reading groups in libraries, reading in classes.

And so I would also encourage, as P&C members to approach your schools and talk about how you as parents, and the broader community can go back into schools, classrooms and libraries, supporting literacy, both with children directly, but also between families, I think is a really important connection that we have lost and can make a big difference and to also bring parents into the school sometimes and introduce them to the libraries and the resources that do exist. They're not always aware of."

Parent quotes from our 2023 survey:

"There should be a clear process for parents to access help for their child and this information should be really accessible."

"A lot more needs to be done to inform parents about what students are learning and how they can support their child at home. When unit outlines/term overviews regurgitate the curriculum 'teacher speak' many parents feel intimidated and unwilling to discuss school/learning with their child."

Recommendation 7

Schools should encourage parents and suitable volunteers where available to come back into schools to support literacy and numeracy in the classroom, particularly in the early years.

Recommendation 8

There should be centrally developed resources for parents which explain the approach to teaching of literacy and numeracy, tips on what parents can do to support literacy and numeracy learning at home, what parents should expect to see in terms of their child's progress and what to do if they think their child is not progressing as they should.