

MEDIA RELEASE

ACT Government Urged to Take Immediate Action to Improve Literacy Outcomes

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A new report by Equity Economics has revealed that a significant number of students in the ACT are struggling to meet literacy benchmarks, with alarming implications for their education and future success.

The report indicates that one in three 15-year-old students in the ACT fall below the national proficient standard for reading, as measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). That rate, applied to all Canberra's school kids, would be enough to fill Bruce Stadium.

The report calls upon the ACT Government to implement evidence-based strategies to improve literacy outcomes for all students.

"These concerning statistics not only reflect national trends, but also reveal the extent of educational inequity within the ACT," report co-author Jessica Del Rio said. "The report highlights that the ACT education system ranks among the most inequitable in Australia, with disadvantaged students and certain cohorts, such as those whose parents did not complete high school and First Nations students, experiencing even greater challenges.

"The ACT has an opportunity to lead the nation in providing gold standard evidence-based classroom practices to lift literacy rates and to dismantle the predictability of achievement by socio-economic status."

"The economic benefits of investing in literacy in schools are evident, with projections indicating that an \$11 million investment in evidence-based strategies could yield an additional \$200 million in lifetime earnings for ACT students. This makes sense, and it's an approach a progressive city like Canberra can embrace."

The report's recommendations have been endorsed by Professor Rauno Parrila, Director of the Australian Centre for the Advancement of Literacy, at the Australian Catholic University.

"Based on publicly available data, this report paints a familiar picture of an education system trapped in outdated practices. Unfortunately, these practices have never been optimal for children's learning or for reducing inequity in educational outcomes, as the evidence reviewed in this report also clearly shows. Year after year, far too many children fail to develop functional literacy skills despite the best efforts of their teachers. The recommendations this report makes are eminently sensible and would go a long way to improving literacy education in ACT, and in many other jurisdictions as well," Professor Parrila said.

The Equity Economics report proposes five essential steps for the ACT Government to undertake.

1. **Adoption of a high-quality, low-variance curriculum:** The report emphasises the importance of implementing the Australian Curriculum, which requires teaching children how to sound out words. Many schools in Australia (and in the ACT) teach students to guess unknown words which is not an effective reading strategy. An investment is required in high-quality comprehensive early reading curriculum materials for teachers and students covering lesson plans, teaching materials, student workbooks, decodable readers and assessments.
2. **Providing principals and teachers with professional development in the skills necessary for reading.** Many *Initial Teacher Education* graduates across Australia are leaving university underprepared to teach children how to read. The report suggests that an investment is required in professional training and coaching for principals and teachers in effective teaching practices and the necessary skills for reading.
3. **Effective use of data, measurement, and universal screening:** The ACT has not yet announced implementation of the Year 1 Phonics Check, a valuable tool for identifying students who may be struggling to learn to read. It is one of the last states that have not yet supported it. The ACT Government is encouraged to prioritise the implementation of this screening tool to proactively find those children who are struggling, rather than waiting for them to fail.

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4. Adoption of a systematic approach to intervention: Based on anecdotal evidence ACT schools do not have a consistent approach to providing additional intervention support to those students who need it. The report emphasises the need for small group tutoring and one on one support for students who are struggling with literacy so that they can catch up with their peers.
5. Enhancement of Initial Teacher Education: The report recommends a partnership between the ACT Government and local universities to ensure that Initial Teacher Education programs align with evidence-based practices and the updated Australian Curriculum. The establishment of a reading clinic at a local campus is also proposed to provide targeted intervention for students requiring additional support.

Jen Cross, co-founder of the ACT Alliance for Evidence-Based Education said, “Parents are becoming increasingly aware that their children are being taught to guess words while learning to read in local schools. They are concerned that their children will struggle with reading if they don’t take action to address the issue. Many teachers are also questioning why they were not equipped with the necessary skills to teach reading effectively during their university education. They are seeking ways to access training and support to improve their teaching methods. As a community, we should strive to improve literacy rates and address inequity in our schools. Everyone deserves the right to read.”

Parent and speech pathologist Scarlett Gaffey added, “Every child deserves a solid foundation in literacy. Every day I see children coming into my practice who have been taught to guess words which is a strategy used by poor readers, not by strong readers, and it’s actually harmful for some kids, who never drop the habit. Kids are often instructional casualties where there is no real reason why they can’t learn to read except they have not been taught well enough. The research and Australian Curriculum says schools should be teaching kids to sound out words yet, in Canberra that is often not the case. Implementing evidence-based strategies, such as a high-quality curriculum and providing training for teachers, can make a significant difference. Investing in our children's education is an investment in their future.

The report, created with support from the Snow Foundation, concludes with three key recommendations for the ACT Government:

1. Make a commitment to improve literacy outcomes for students in ACT Government schools and set targets to reduce the proportion of students not meeting basic literacy levels.
2. Invest \$11 million in an evidence-based literacy reform package, including funds for curriculum development, decodable readers, professional development, the Year 1 Phonics Check, and small group intervention support.
3. Collaborate with local universities to ensure Initial Teacher Education programs align with evidence-based literacy instructional practices.

The report highlights successful local examples, such as Catholic primary schools in the ACT which have achieved significant improvements in literacy outcomes through a program called *Catalyst*. By investing in evidence-based practices, implementing a low-variance curriculum, and providing training and coaching for teachers, these schools have significantly lifted the performance of their students.

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