



28 February 2024

Secretariat
Inquiry into literacy and numeracy in the ACT
GPO Box 158
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Inquiry Committee,

I am writing to provide input on behalf of The Snow Foundation regarding the inquiry into literacy and numeracy in the ACT. As an organisation with a long-standing commitment to supporting families and education in Canberra and the surrounding areas, we are deeply invested in initiatives aimed at improving literacy, numeracy, and wellbeing outcomes for children.

Due to our keen interest in understanding ACT student literacy performance, we enlisted Equity Economics last year to produce a report. Of particular interest to The Snow Foundation was the impact of the Catalyst program, implemented in 2019 by Catholic schools in Canberra and Goulburn, which adopted teaching and learning methodologies informed by the Science of Learning and Science of Reading.

In the Equity Economics Report, 'Raising the grade' (Del Rio et al., 2023) the authors found one in three 15-year-old students in the ACT are below the Australian national proficient standard for reading in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). They found that the ACT's performance has been in decline for the last 20 years and that there is a notable disparity in academic performance between advantaged and disadvantaged students in the ACT. There is a gap of one and a half years in Year 3 and four years in Year 9 between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

The Report also illustrated that rapid improvement is possible. Government schools in South Australia and Catholic schools in the Canberra region that undertook the Catalyst program have both lifted performances following high-quality research-based literacy instruction. The Catholic schools in Canberra have had remarkable results. In 2019, 42% of Catholic schools and 54% of Government schools were underperforming (NAPLAN). In 2022, only 4% of Catholic schools underperformed compared to 60% of Government schools. The reduction in underperforming students was even greater in writing and spelling NAPLAN results. See appendix for a graph of these results. The Snow Foundation is excited by these results and urges the Inquiry Committee to learn from these jurisdictions.

The Snow Foundation concurs with the recommendations of the Raising the Grade report which are to implement:

- Step 1: A high-quality curriculum.
- Step 2: Professional development for principals and teachers.
- Step 3: Effective progress monitoring to support intervention.
- Step 4: A systematic approach to intervention for struggling readers.
- Step 5: High-quality Initial Teacher Education at universities.

The Snow Foundation also agrees with the recommendations from ‘The Reading Guarantee’ report that was recently published by the Grattan Institute (Hunter et al., 2023). Their detailed report is an excellent summary of where we are and where we should be. They recommend that governments:

Step 1: Commit to at least 90% of students becoming proficient readers.

Step 2: Give teachers and school leaders specific guidelines on how to teach reading according to the evidence.

Step 3: Ensure schools have the high-quality curriculum materials and assessments teachers need to teach reading well.

Step 4: Require all schools to do universal screening of reading skills and help students falling behind to catch up.

Step 5: Ensure teachers have the knowledge and skills they need to teach reading well, through essential training and new quality-assured micro-credentials, and by creating specialist literacy teacher roles.

Step 6: Encourage best practice teaching through closer monitoring and strengthened school performance reviews.

There are decades of research underpinning the recommendations from these recent reports and it presents the ACT government with an excellent opportunity to make policy decisions to support their implementation.

The Snow Foundation views the autonomy of schools in the ACT as a possible obstacle to the adoption of ACT reforms. There are specific areas, such as literacy, where having parameters would be beneficial. For instance, the UK government ensures high-quality phonics teaching by letting schools choose only from validated systematic synthetic phonics teaching programs (SSP). The programs are reviewed by independent evaluators, and 45 SSPs have met the criteria. The UK also mandate the Year 1 Phonics Check and Year 4 Multiplication Check. ACT public schools could also be required to use evidence-informed reading assessment tools at least twice a year, ideally the same assessment so that schools that need support could be easily identified.

Children have the right to high-quality research-based literacy and numeracy instruction. We know that the trajectory of a child’s life is affected by their literacy and numeracy skills. Thank you for considering our input, and we look forward to the outcomes of the inquiry.

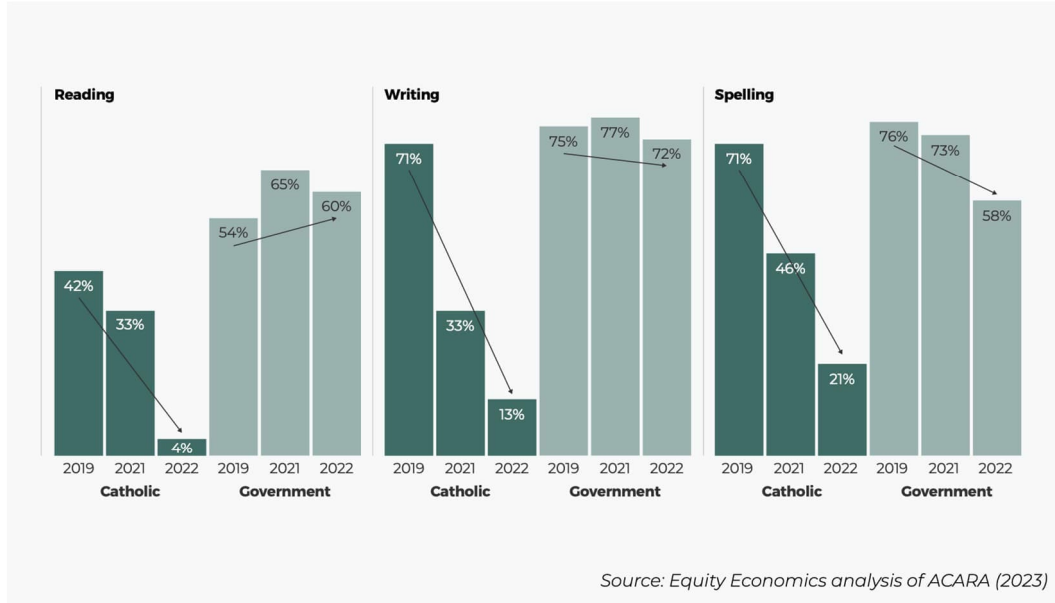
Sincerely,



Georgina Byron
Chief Executive Officer
The Snow Foundation

Appendix

Figure 4.3: NAPLAN Literacy results, Year 3, Catholic & Government schools in Canberra (% schools below or well below average compared to similar students in Australia) 2019–2022



i Note in any given year the calculation excludes schools that do not have comparison data available. Jervis Bay School is also excluded as it is outside of Canberra and has a different socio-educational demographic.

References

Del Rio, J, Noura, H, Jones, K Sukkarieh, (2023) Raising the grade: How schools in the Australian Capital Territory can lift literacy outcomes for students and the economy'. Equity Economics

Hunter, J., Stobart, A., and Haywood, A. (2023) The Reading Guarantee: How to give every child the best chance of success. Grattan Institute