

Figure 6: Process for ACT Education System Review

3.1 // ACT Education System Structures

Degrees of autonomy and measures of accountability fluctuate with the political ideology of the governing party within state and federal jurisdictions. This can have dire consequences for localised support mechanisms for principals and schools, as policies granting greater autonomy tend to be coupled with shifting responsibility to schools and principals while also cutting structural support services within state education departments.⁶³

3.1.1 Governance and School Autonomy

[ACT] Schools' Strategic Plans and Annual Action Plans reviewed by the Audit Office varied considerably in quality and detail.⁶⁴

Recent large-scale research in Australia has pointed to a range of issues with school autonomy, including:⁶⁵

1. The intentions of school autonomy have changed over time, from the original socially democratic view, to market driven forms of autonomy today. The result has narrowed leadership forms to managerialism and compliance, instead of instructional leadership opportunities.
2. The complexity of Australia's education governance (State and Federal responsibility, and three sectors - Catholic, Independent and Government) has led to different articulations of autonomy across different states and over different time frames.

3. School autonomy does not necessarily lead to better student outcomes.
4. Some school leaders are more able to negotiate systemic constraints than others.
5. Parent opportunities to participate democratically in school governance are decreasing.

In the ACT government school system, considerable autonomy devolves to School Leaders. The purpose of this decentralised model established in the 1970s originally was to enable schools to be more responsive to the needs of local students. However, over time this model has led to the development of a wide variation between schools in policies, cultures, curriculum, teaching approaches, assessment, use of information for decision-making, and the increasing imposition of financial and other governance and decision making tasks unrelated to the actual purpose of schools: delivering the best possible learning outcomes for students.

The ACT Auditor-General has concluded that "A better balance between school autonomy and consistency across schools in how performance information is analysed and used is needed."⁶⁶ A similar conclusion was arrived at by an Independent Inquiry into the NSW system reporting in 2021: "We need a strong, coordinated public education system, not a collection of schools."⁶⁷

⁶³ Keddie, A et al, 2020: *School Autonomy Reform and Social Justice in Australian Public Education*, Progress Report 1. Deakin University; Monash University; Curtin University. Available at schoolautonomyandsocialjustice.org

⁶⁴ ACT Auditor-General's Report, 4/2017 (May): *Performance Information in ACT Public Schools*; p 67

⁶⁵ Keddie, A et al, 2020: *School Autonomy Reform and Social Justice in Australian Public Education*, Progress Report 1. Deakin University; Monash University; Curtin University. Available at schoolautonomyandsocialjustice.org

⁶⁶ ACT Auditor-General's Report, 4/2017 (May): *Performance Information in ACT Public Schools*, p 1

⁶⁷ *Valuing the Teaching Profession - An Independent Inquiry for NSW Teachers' Federation*, Chaired by Dr Geoff Gallop, AC. 2021, p 11

3.1.2 Education Funding and Spending

Australia is among the world's highest-spending countries on schooling. Yet, the educational return on this investment for parents, taxpayers, employers, and students, has deteriorated.⁶⁸

Expenditure per full time student in government schools in the ACT, at \$21,299, is the second highest in Australia, after the Northern Territory (Table 2). ACT expenditure is considerably above the Australian average of \$18,387.

These figures for 2017-18 per capita (student) expenditure are the latest for which comparative data are available, and continue the same relationships evidenced by 2014-15 figures reported by the ACT Auditor-General in 2017.

Importantly, in the ACT Auditor-General's 2017 report, the high expenditure in the ACT is attributed to capital related expenditure, and high employee related expenditure (low student to teacher ratios, higher than average teacher salaries, superannuation schemes and payroll tax).⁶⁸ This type of expenditure has not actually dealt with the causes of underperformance in terms of Literacy and Numeracy outcomes.

The picture becomes clearer when we compare ACT and Federal government recurrent expenditure (Table 3). Over the ten-year period 2009-2019, the ACT government's proportion of spending has declined by 3.2%, and the Federal government's proportion has increased by 26.1% (see table right).

Table 2: Per Capita Expenditure on Government Schools, 2017-18 financial year

Per capita expenditure (per FTE student) on government schools, by school level, by state and territory, 2017-2018 financial year (\$)

| State/Territory | Primary | Secondary | All students |
|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| New South Wales | 16,796 | 22,454 | 18,965 |
| Victoria | 15,546 | 19,151 | 16,939 |
| Queensland | 16,879 | 19,970 | 18,071 |
| South Australia | 17,535 | 19,022 | 18,059 |
| Western Australia | 17,952 | 21,837 | 19,406 |
| Tasmania | 17,353 | 20,494 | 18,632 |
| Northern Territory | 25,074 | 28,550 | 26,296 |
| Australian Capital Territory | 19,241 | 24,337 | 21,299 |
| Australia | 16,847 | 20,881 | 18,387 |

Note: Amounts include state/territory and Australian Government contributions.

Source: Education Council, National Schools Statistics Collection (Finance), 2018, in National Report on Schooling in Australia, ACARA, 2020; p 40.

⁶⁸ Fahey, G., 2020: *Dollars and Sense: Time for smart reform of Australian school funding*, Centre for Independent Studies. Available at: <https://www.cis.org.au/publications/research-reports/dollars-and-sense-time-for-smart-reform-of-australian-school-funding/>

⁶⁹ ACT Auditor-General's Report, 4/2017 (May): *Performance Information in ACT Public Schools*, p 1

⁷⁰ *Report on Government Services 2021*. Released 2 Feb 2021. Part B, Section 4: School Education

⁷¹ The *ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20* contains numerous examples of policies that have been announced and implemented, with no publicly available evaluation. For example, Early Years Literacy Initiative; Future of Education Strategy; Positive Behaviour for Learning; Learning Culture (Empowered Learning Professionals Plan 2018-21); Affiliated Schools Program

⁷² Youth Coalition of the ACT and ACTCOSS, July 2015: *Issues Paper: Educational Inequity in the ACT*; p 8

⁷³ Youth Coalition of the ACT and ACTCOSS, July 2015: *Issues Paper: Educational Inequity in the ACT*; p 5

⁷⁴ Roberts, P. and Leonard, S. 10 Dec 2013: PISA results show ACT schools fare poorly in teaching disadvantaged, *Sydney Morning Herald online*, accessed 2 June 2021

Table 3: Federal and ACT Government Recurrent Expenditure on Education 2009-2019

| Year | Federal (\$000) | ACT (\$000) | Total (\$000) | Fed % | ACT % |
|---------|-----------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------|---------------|
| 2009-10 | 60,224 | 675,551 | 735,775 | 8.2 | 91.8 |
| 2010-11 | 62,945 | 719,081 | 782,026 | 8.0 | 92.0 |
| 2011-12 | 71,134 | 736,122 | 807,255 | 8.8 | 91.2 |
| 2012-13 | 68,582 | 758,354 | 826,937 | 8.3 | 91.7 |
| 2013-14 | 76,970 | 757,526 | 827,423 | 9.3 | 91.6 |
| 2014-15 | 83,483 | 743,941 | 834,496 | 10.0 | 89.1 |
| 2015-16 | 85,934 | 779,661 | 865,595 | 9.9 | 90.1 |
| 2016-17 | 91,803 | 791,461 | 883,263 | 10.4 | 89.6 |
| 2017-18 | 98,630 | 826,986 | 925,616 | 10.7 | 89.3 |
| 2018-19 | 107,704 | 859,702 | 967,406 | 11.1 | 88.9 |
| | | | % increase/ decrease | 26.1% | (3.2)% |

Table generated from data in Table 4A.10, in Report on Government Services 2021.⁷⁰

There is little evidence of policy and program evaluation⁷¹ in the ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-2020, or elsewhere. Evidence from many jurisdictions points to the fact that funding of widely implemented strategies does not necessarily mean that these strategies are effective.

The result may well be that funding remains high, but it is not deployed to where it is most needed, or to where it will have the biggest impact on student learning outcomes.

Regular, rigorous evaluation of strategies is required to ensure that funding is spent on what works.

3.1.3 // Equity of Access to Education

Educational disadvantage in the ACT is hidden and we need to be taking steps to address the inequities in the system.⁷²

A Youth Coalition/ACTCOSS Issues Paper on Educational Inequity in the ACT has observed:⁷³

As a result of the diversity within Canberra's suburbs, most ACT schools have small numbers of highly disadvantaged students, rather than disadvantage being concentrated in a few schools. This may pose a challenge for schools in responding and providing appropriate supports for the small number of students experiencing disadvantage. Genuine equity means that every student is given the opportunity to achieve excellence.

In their analysis of ACT Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, researchers Roberts & Leonard at the University of Canberra have commented that: "A close examination of the PISA report shows that the ACT quickly falls to near the bottom of the nation when it comes to equity in education... In a school where 490 students come from a similar background, it may be easy to lose sight of the 10 who are different."⁷⁴

They found:

Another striking feature of the ACT results is that students in average SES schools are not achieving as strongly as students in schools of similar SES in NSW, Queensland and Western Australia.⁷⁵

In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Roberts & Leonard commented on:

... a clear difference in reading ability equivalent to two to three years of learning, and that the ACT is the only jurisdiction in Australia where the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students actually widens in high school.⁷⁶

The ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20 (p 53) records that from 2015 to 2019, the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who received a nationally recognised vocational qualification dropped from 63% to 38%.

As far back as 2010, the ACT Council of P&C Associations noted that:

Government school education should aim to provide for the maximum development of every student without distinction due to social or economic status, ability, gender, race, religion, colour or family beliefs.⁷⁷

Ten years later, the success of the ACT government to improve equity within the education system has been mixed. One of the four planks of the ACT government's Future of Education Strategy is "to strengthen systems to focus on equity with quality".

Consultation with the community near the time that that policy was formulated indicated that there was a strong perception within the community that there was much work to be done in the equity sphere, ranging from physical access to schools for students (and staff) with disabilities; through to socio-economic and First Nations Peoples learning disadvantage.⁷⁸

Further, the Grattan Institute has observed that "the ACT is not good at stretching its top students, particularly in numeracy."⁷⁹

As recently as May 2021, this situation doesn't seem to have changed. There have been numerous complaints from parents with regard to equity issues at The Margaret Hendry School, the first new school opened under the *Future of Education Strategy*. Parents' comments include:⁸⁰

"It's been nothing short of a disaster" [she said]. "It's very alternative. It obviously will work for some kids, but it doesn't work for a lot of kids, especially kids who have been to structured schools."

"One mother said her five-year-old child was suspended 15 times last year before receiving a formal diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder."

"Mikayla Elms' daughter was suspended seven times when she was in kindergarten, also waiting for an ADHD test." "Ms Elms said she tried repeatedly to speak with the school and Education Directorate to get more support to no avail."

⁷⁵ Roberts, P. and Leonard, S. 10 Dec 2013: PISA results show ACT schools fare poorly in teaching disadvantaged, *Sydney Morning Herald* online, accessed 2 June 2021

⁷⁶ Roberts, P. and Leonard, S. 10 Dec 2013: PISA results show ACT schools fare poorly in teaching disadvantaged, *Sydney Morning Herald* online, accessed 2 June 2021

⁷⁷ ACT Council of P&C Associations in Inquiry into the Educational Achievement Gap in the ACT, May 2010. Report 3, Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs; p 11

⁷⁸ https://www.education.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1234657/Future-Of-Education-Why-does-educational-equity-matter.pdf

The ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20 (p 25) records that only one of its two strategic performance indicators for improving equity in learning outcomes was met. Although one of the features of the ACT Education system is that much inequity is “hidden”, what is very obvious from research analysis and parent comment is that a range of inequities, hidden or otherwise, remain unaddressed.

3.1.4 School Infrastructure Issues

In 2018 Woden Valley primary schools had on average 502 students. This compares to only 337 in Tuggeranong and is second only to the North/Gunghalin schools in terms of average size. At the same time, most of the schools in the Woden area are now above 50 years of age and require significant maintenance and upgrades to meet the requirements of this growing population.⁸¹

School Overcrowding and Demountable Buildings

Overcrowded schools are a major concern of many parents in the ACT. Whilst some schools are over-enrolled, others are underutilised. Factors affecting enrolments include changing demographics in intake areas; urban infill; priority enrolment areas; and the reputation of the school. These factors are often inter-related. For example, as at the start of the 2021 school year, four out of the five largest primary schools were in the city’s growing north - Gunghalin. Telopea Park High School and Narrabundah College, both with reputations for excellence, had the

second and third highest intakes for high schools and colleges, respectively.⁸²

In February 2021 the level of concern over deficiencies in the ongoing management of school capacity and infrastructure resulted in the setting up of the Inquiry into the Management of ACT School Infrastructure, due to report in December 2021.

Submissions to that Inquiry to date cover a range of concerns, for example:

“Garran Primary School has been engaged in School Infrastructure discussions with the ACT Education Directorate over the past 5 years. The School has been at maximum capacity over this time to the point where it has impacted on daily operations and delivery of education.”
Garran Primary School Board and P&C Committee (p 1)

“The school has been experiencing capacity and infrastructure issues since inception, in part due to the larger than anticipated school-going population in the vicinity.”
Harrison School Parent & Community Association (p 1)

⁷⁹ Prof Peter Goss, in Groch, S. 17 Nov 2018: ‘ACT schools are Australia’s most advantaged, so why are they falling behind?’ *The Canberra Times*, online

⁸⁰ Lansdown, S. 22 May 2021: ‘Bullying and suspension “disaster” at ACT school’, *The Canberra Times*; pp 4-5

⁸¹ Mawson Primary School P&C, 1 May 2021, *Submission* to Inquiry into the Management of School Infrastructure; p 1

⁸² Lansdown, S., 18 Jan 2021: ‘The ACT schools growing the fastest in 2021’, *The Canberra Times*

“Despite the best efforts of the Lyneham Primary School Principal, Building Services Officer and Business Manager, several maintenance issues are not able to be addressed within the regular school budget. Some of these are of increasing concern to the health and safety of staff and students.”

Lyneham Primary School Board (p 2)

“As a board, we are concerned that poor building maintenance increases the risk to student and staff safety and wellbeing, potentially resulting in costly repairs and litigation.”

Lyneham Primary School Board (p 2)

‘To put it bluntly, they are already “full”.’

Mawson Primary School P&C Committee (p 3)

Figure 7 shows schools with greater than 90% enrolment as black circles - predominantly in the north, while those with less than 40% enrolment are in white. Seven out of 10 of Canberra’s least- used government schools are in Tuggeranong.⁸³

Demountable buildings are being used as permanent buildings to smooth over capacity issues, resulting in loss of playgrounds, sporting fields and parking spaces. Forty-two per cent of ACT government schools have demountable buildings. Some schools have had demountable buildings for almost 40 years.⁸⁴

Funding is being allocated in a catch-up manner to the building of schools in new suburbs already populated. Residents of these growth areas have endured long delays in the construction of infrastructure such as schools, bridges, and amenities including shopping centres and public transport.

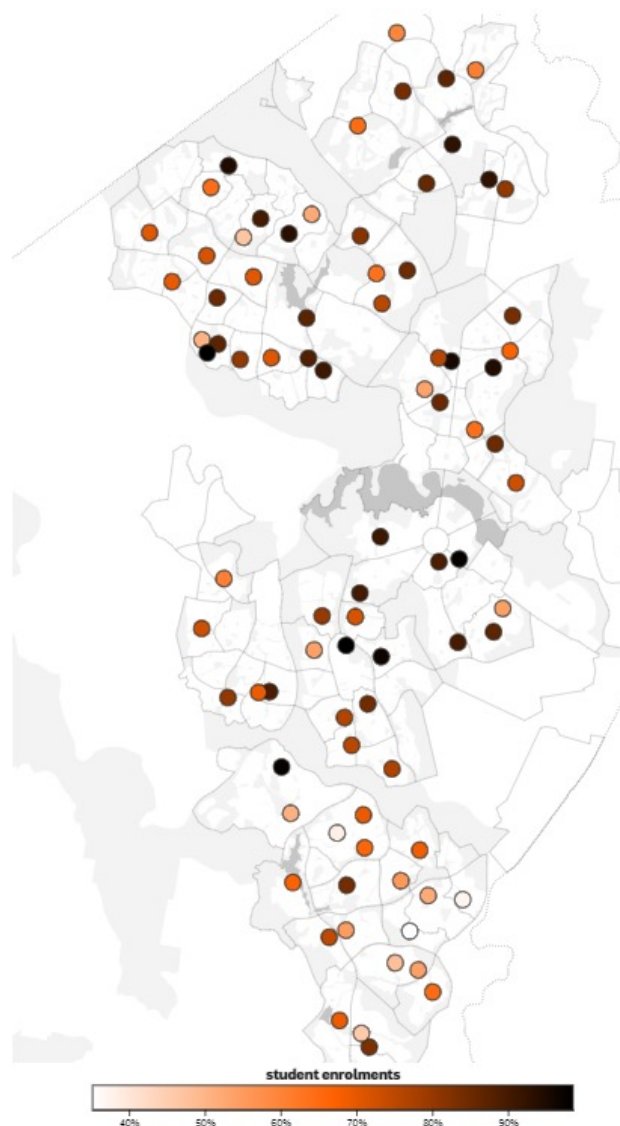


Figure 7: Student enrolments in the ACT 2020

Source: ABC News Online⁸⁵

⁸³ Mannheim, M. 23 July 2020: Many Canberra public schools are crowded — but not in Tuggeranong. Should underused schools be closed? ABC News online.

⁸⁴ ACT Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, 24 April 2021: Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion Inquiry into 2019-20 Annual Reports, *Answers to Questions on Notice No. 24 EC*

⁸⁵ Mannheim, M. 23 July 2020: Many Canberra public schools are crowded — but not in Tuggeranong. Should underused schools be closed? ABC News online.

Ageing Infrastructure

The ACT Education Directorate has spent almost \$40 million in the past four years cleaning up lead paint and asbestos in schools, admitting they only informed parents of the most recent contamination because of media attention.⁸⁶

Concerns over ageing infrastructure in the ACT are widespread. Ageing existing assets are being neglected. The community has stated its concerns about maintenance of schools generally; for example, some parents with children at Macquarie Primary School believe it is in a 'dangerous' state of disrepair.⁸⁷

Management of school infrastructure assets has suffered due to lack of review and monitoring by the Education Directorate. In his report on Maintenance of ACT Government School Infrastructure in 2019,⁸⁸ the ACT Auditor-General found a range of problems with the management and maintenance of infrastructure assets, including:

- The Education Directorate has a sound framework for the management of school infrastructure assets, but its implementation is hampered by poor supporting systems and processes (p 1).
- Building condition assessments of school infrastructure that were to be undertaken by the Directorate every three years, were scaled back in 2014 and stopped in 2018. This has led to the Education Directorate not having a clear

and consolidated understanding of school infrastructure asset conditions (p 1).

- Annual asset maintenance planning undertaken by the schools was inconsistent and where plans were produced, they varied in their purpose, quality, and comprehensiveness. For the six schools that were considered as part of the audit there was considerable variability in what was presented to the Audit Office as a maintenance plan. "One school had not prepared a maintenance plan and one school advised that it was in the process of drafting a maintenance plan" (p 40).
- Software was purchased by the Directorate in 2015 to facilitate management of school assets. "It was purchased for \$52,500 (GST ex), ...with an ongoing subscription and support cost of \$35,460 (GST ex) each year. The Infrastructure and Capital Works Branch entered building condition assessment data for two schools as part of a pilot exercise in November 2018, but no other building condition assessment data is in the system" for other 86 schools managed by the Education Directorate (p 5).
- Increased maintenance costs have led to consistent budget over-runs. For example, "in 2018 schools were allocated a total of \$5.4 million in funding but reported spending a total of \$8.2 million" (p 6), leading the Auditor-General to conclude

⁸⁶ Lansdown, S. 23 March 2021 'Asbestos, lead clean up costs Education Directorate \$40 million', *The Canberra Times*. Online

⁸⁷ Lansdown, S. 25 Feb 2021: 'Macquarie Primary School in 'dangerous' state of disrepair, parents say', *The Canberra Times*. Online

⁸⁸ ACT Auditor-General Report No 11 of 2019: *Maintenance of ACT Government School Infrastructure*; p 1

- School funding requests for Specific Works are widely inconsistent. “For example, a college requested \$7.4 million in funding for various projects in 2016-17, representing 52 percent of the total value of requests from all schools and almost two times the total approved funds for 2016-17. By way of comparison another college requested \$10,000 in funding for projects. Other ACT public schools made no requests for funding at all” (p 61).

Further, ACT government documents released under Freedom of Information record that recent costs of remediation and removal of toxic substances including lead and asbestos from school buildings totalled almost \$39 million from 2016-2020.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ ACT government document “Request for factual information regarding hazardous materials removal” obtained under FOI March 2021, Part 2, Document No. 29 dated 20/9/20, p 44

3.2 // School Leadership and Culture

“For better and worse, culture and leadership are inextricably linked.”⁹⁰

3.2.1 Leadership

Within an often-challenging wider environment, it is the school leader, or principal, who sets the tone of a school. Students and staff will not perform to the best of their ability without a positive school culture that determines the values and acceptable standards and behaviours for that school. A change in school leader will often mean a visible improvement or decline in school performance, such is the importance of leadership.

Issues with school leadership in the context of governance and autonomy have been discussed in section 3.1.1 of this paper.

In addition to the tensions caused by increasing administrative burdens on school principals, the annual Australian School Leader Wellbeing survey reported that in 2019, school principals continue to report sheer quantity of work; lack of time to focus on teaching and learning; and student mental health as their main sources of stress.⁹¹ Results were the same in the 2020 survey.⁹²

The mental health of students and staff has become an increasing source of stress for school principals in recent years, reaching the highest point in 2019.⁹³ Very similar results were found in the 2020 survey conducted in Term 3.⁹⁴

Amongst these ongoing issues is the need for school principals to provide leadership: to establish and maintain a strong positive culture in their school. The need to improve school culture is a real issue in Australia:

*Compared to the average student across OECD countries, Australian students reported being bullied more frequently, felt more afraid of failing, and were more likely to have skipped school and feel lonely at school.*⁹⁵

These are concerning results. As the OECD data suggest, there is a range of negative emotions and behaviours that need to be addressed within the education system generally, and in schools specifically. Developing a positive school culture is an important means of doing so.

Identification with school is an indirect measure of the strength of a school’s culture. The third strategic objective in the ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-2020 was designed to measure identification with schools by three groups: teacher; parent; and student. None of these objectives were met (see discussion at 2.1.3 in this paper). A result of only 60% of students “strongly identifying” with their school⁹⁶ suggests disconnection may be an important factor at play.

⁹⁰ Groysberg, B., Lee, J. et al 2018: “The Leader’s Guide to Corporate Culture”, *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb 2018. available at: <https://hbr.org/2018/01/the-leaders-guide-to-corporate-culture>

⁹¹ Pierpoint, A. 2020: *School leader wellbeing: it’s time to act*. Available at <https://www.educationmattersmag.com.au/aspa-school-leader-wellbeing-its-time-to-act/>

⁹² https://www.principalhealth.org/reports/2020_AU_Final_Report.pdf; p 37

⁹³ Pierpoint, A. 2020: *School leader wellbeing: it’s time to act*. Available at <https://www.educationmattersmag.com.au/aspa-school-leader-wellbeing-its-time-to-act/>

⁹⁴ Riley, P. et al, 2020: *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey, 2020 Data*. Deakin University. Available at: https://www.healthandwellbeing.org/reports/AU/2020_AU_Final_Report_Embargoed.pdf

⁹⁵ https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_AUS.pdf; p 1

⁹⁶ ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-2020, p 29

3.2.2 Bullying and Violence

A concerning report completed in 2019 by the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs was released only in early 2021: Management and Minimisation of Bullying and Violence in ACT Schools.⁹⁷ Key comments from that report include:

“The ACT Parents and Citizens Association (ACTCPA) told the Committee that the rate of bullying has become a concern to the majority of ACT students with 86 percent of students agreeing that they are worried about the incidences of bullying.”

“The Committee heard many examples of cyber bullying and understood how the effects of cyber bullying can be different to bullying experienced in other forms.”

“The Committee heard distressing stories from parents who were concerned about the long-term effects that bullying had on their children.”

“The Committee heard from parents that children feel scared to go to school for significant periods after occasions of bullying, and often feel that school leaders are unable to act in order to protect them.”

“One family had to make the difficult decision to move their child interstate to live with a family member for the fear of their safety.”

“The Committee heard that the Education Directorate provided limited support to parents who sought advice on appropriate responses to bullying in local priority area enrolment schools.”

One submission to the Inquiry by parents concerned their child’s witnessing another student being king hit; rocks being thrown; and threats of violence. The submission stated that: “At no point did the school appear to have capacity to deal with the situation appropriately.”⁹⁸

These comments are disturbing. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has reported that:

Children who are bullied, as well as those who witness or intervene in bullying, may experience immediate physical or emotional consequences (such as injuries or embarrassment). Children victims of bullying are also:

- more likely to have poor academic performance
- at risk of struggling with transition points throughout life, such as adjusting to secondary school
- more likely to have mental health concerns, such as feelings of anxiety and depression
- at higher risk of suicide (AIFS 2017; Rigby & Johnson 2016).⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs, Report 6, September 2019: *Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools*;

⁹⁸ 19 Sept 2019: Inquiry reveals ‘traumatic’ stories of school bullying, City News, available at: <https://citynews.com.au/2019/inquiry-reveals-traumatic-stories-of-school-bullying/>

⁹⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Sept 2020: Australia’s Children. Available at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/justice-and-safety/bullying>



“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.”

Maya Angelou, Civil Rights Leader

In schools, nearly 80% of bullying incidents take place in the playground;¹⁰⁰ and cyber-bullying has become a widespread phenomenon. It must be noted that students are not the only victims of bullying and violence. The 2019 Australian School Leader Wellbeing survey found that 57% of ACT school principals surveyed reported that they were subjected to threats of violence¹⁰¹- the second highest percentage after the Northern Territory; and 49% reported actual physical violence. Worryingly, in the 2020 COVID year, the 2020 survey found that 57% of ACT school principals had suffered physical violence from parents or students - an 8% increase from the 2019 survey.¹⁰²

The ACT Council for Social Service (ACTCOSS) has emphasised that “student safety and wellbeing cannot be dealt with in a closed off manner by the school on its own... we need to understand the interconnected influences on child and adolescent development: school; society and community; and family.”¹⁰³

Government policy; school leadership; school culture; wider societal norms and practices, and community engagement all need to be involved in any efforts to improve behaviours at school, and increasingly, online.

Clearly, there is much work to be done in this area in the ACT.

¹⁰⁰ Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs, Report 6, September 2019: *Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools*; p 10

¹⁰¹ Pierpoint, A. 2020: School leader wellbeing: it’s time to act. Available at <https://www.educationmattersmag.com.au/asp-school-leader-wellbeing-its-time-to-act/>

¹⁰² Lansdown, S. 14 March 2021: ‘ACT principals report highest rates of violence in Australia’, *The Canberra Times* online

¹⁰³ ACTCOSS, May 2019: Submission to Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools

3.3 // Teacher Education System and Practice

In 2016 ACT Labor introduced its policy, *Great Teachers by Design*, to improve teaching quality. Although that policy's stated intent was that "every child, young person and adult will benefit from a high quality, accessible education",¹⁰⁴ evidence suggests that the policy has been unable to address fundamental issues within the ACT teaching education system.

The systemic problems in the ACT teacher education system arise from a combination of factors:

1. University entry requirements, including low ATARs and no prerequisites.
2. Subject requirements in Colleges (Years 11 and 12) may not be sufficiently rigorous.
3. In College, teachers who are teaching outside their area of specialisation, especially STEM subjects, is a particular issue.
4. Course content in teaching degrees may not cover the right mix of skills that are needed in the classroom.
5. Workforce issues and professional development.

3.3.1 ACT University Entry

Requirements for Teaching Degrees
Are entry requirements for ACT teaching degrees sufficiently rigorous? Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr Alan Finkel, is concerned about the "confusing" signals that are sent to students about subject choice for

university career pathways, including Education:

I have long advocated the need for a common set of advice to school students about the importance of studying core subjects. This would help them sort through the maze of subject offerings... At the same time, universities have shifted away from prerequisites for entry to many courses, further confusing the signals and the subjects they should be taking.¹⁰⁵

At the ACT's two universities that offer Teaching degrees, the University of Canberra and the Australian Catholic University, there are no prerequisites to enrol in a Bachelor of Education degree. Maths and English are "assumed knowledge" - meaning that a program will be taught assuming students have a certain level of knowledge. And in fact, at the University of Canberra, two of the first-year subjects are Core Literacy and Core Mathematics - not how to teach them, but to enable the student teachers themselves to acquire these skills, as Maths and English are only "assumed knowledge".

¹⁰⁴ ACT Education Directorate, 2016: *Great Teachers by Design*; p 6

¹⁰⁵ Finkel, A., 23 Sept 2020: "Let's be honest about what's needed for Uni", *The Australian*

In other States and Territories, there are concerns about universities using teacher training as a “cash cow”, rather than focusing on lifting the standard of teacher graduates.¹⁰⁶ NSW has moved recently toward reinstating prerequisites for these courses; and QLD and VIC have prerequisites for both English and Mathematics in place.

The second concerning issue with entry to Teaching degrees is the very low ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank). In semester 1, 2020, the lowest ATAR to be offered a place at the University of Canberra’s B. Ed program was 48.¹⁰⁷ It is difficult to understand how a student can thrive at university, and become a competent teacher, with an ATAR of that order. Indeed, the ACT Australian Education Union is of the view that the minimum ATAR for teaching should be 70.¹⁰⁸

3.3.2 At Schools Teacher Workforce

The ACT Education Directorate has a workforce of 7,681, of which 3,794 are classroom teachers.¹⁰⁹ The teacher workforce in the ACT is regulated by the Teacher Quality Institute.

There are several unresolved issues with the ACT teacher workforce. Across Australia, issues in attracting high quality candidates into teaching include ¹¹⁰ the fact that the teaching profession is undervalued, whereas in other countries, for example Ireland and Singapore, teaching is a high-status profession.

Other issues include: a lack

of attractive career pathways; too much time is spent on administration; too many beginning teachers taking classes, possibly impacting student learning outcomes; not enough teachers in Maths, Science, Languages and Library Sciences; and over-representation of casual and relief teachers from large pools, leading to loss of continuity and learning in the classroom.

Further, the gender imbalance in the teaching workforce between females and males has increased significantly over the last 50 years:

In Australia in 1969, there were 1.4 female teachers for every male teacher. Fifty years on that figure has increased to 2.5 female teachers for every male teacher.¹¹¹

In the ACT that figure is even higher: women comprise 75%, or 3 in 4 teachers in the workforce.¹¹² This is a higher percentage of female teachers than the Australian figure, which as of February 2021 comprised 71.8% women.¹¹³ The under-representation of men in the teaching workforce is more pronounced in primary schools, with 18.1% of the workforce in that sector male. In secondary schools, the figure is 38.9% male in the teacher workforce across Australia.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁶ Chrysanthos, N. Feb 17, 2021 - 1.08pm: “NSW Education Minister targets unis using teacher training as a ‘cash cow’”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* online. Accessed 13 April 2021

¹⁰⁷ Universities Admissions Centre, 2021: UAC course search (<https://www.uac.edu.au/course-search/undergraduate>)

¹⁰⁸ ACT AEU Secretary Glenn Fowler, in Groch, S: 17 Nov 2018: ACT schools are Australia’s most advantaged, so why are they falling behind? *The Canberra Times*

¹⁰⁹ ACT Education Directorate Annual Report, 2019-2020; p 13

¹¹⁰ Henebery, B., 16 Jan 2020: *Schools face ‘critical’ teacher shortage in 2020*, <https://www.theeducatoronline.com/>; Patty, A., 17 Jan, 2021: Teacher shortage opens gate to country lifestyle, SMH

¹¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/2019

¹¹² ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20; p 258

¹¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Feb 2021. www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release

¹¹⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Feb 2021. www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release

Research at the University of Tasmania found that three major areas of concern contributed to low numbers of male teachers in primary school: fear and uncertainty around physical contact; expectations to take on masculine or gendered roles; and social isolation.

The official stats are that 18 per cent of Australian primary teachers are male, but that number includes principals, PE specialists, etcetera, so the actual percentage in the classroom would probably be about 15 per cent.¹¹⁵

Other research suggests that this decline will lead to the “extinction” of the male teacher over the next few decades.¹¹⁶

3.3.3 Trends in Teaching Practice

It is to be hoped that there is universal agreement amongst educators that the classroom of the past with rigid rows of desks populated by alternate rows of neat girls and boys silently bending over their workbooks and studiously copying down what the teacher has written on the blackboard, has no place in today’s schools.

Arguably however, from that point of agreement, perspectives rapidly diverge.

Teaching approaches need to be flexible and appropriate to the context, topic, and student; not constrained by ideology. Eleven years ago, the ACT Standing Committee on Education, Training

and Youth Affairs recommended that:

The ACT Government ensure that teachers are aware and able to access expert advice and services to support them in adapting their pedagogical practice to suit the different educational needs of their students.¹¹⁷

This recommendation does not appear to have been adopted.

In every sector of the economy and in every sphere of life, there will always be popular trends and fashions, ideology, and preferred modes of operating. The Education sector is not immune to these ebbs and flows.

Over the years, ideas with little evidence to back them up, have come and gone. Examples are: learning styles; whole language reading; dropping explicit teaching of grammar; and open classrooms. Unfortunately, these untested popular trends have led to wasted time and a loss of progress in learning for students, sometimes for generations.

¹¹⁵ Dr V Cruikshank, in Farrow-Smith, Eloise, 13 Feb 2019: Why male teachers are disappearing from Australian schools, ABC.net.au

¹¹⁶ McGrath, K. and Van Bergen, P. 2017: Are male teachers headed for extinction? The 50-year decline of male teachers in Australia, *Economics of Education Review*, Vol 60, Oct. Pp 159-167

¹¹⁷ *Inquiry into the Educational Achievement Gap in the ACT, May 2010*. Report 3, Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs; p vii, Recommendation 2



Today, the classrooms of the 1950s seem like an alien environment

Photo by Museums Victoria

For example, in the case of English grammar, from the 1970s two entire generations of Australian students were not provided the tools to deconstruct English and to understand how our language is put together. The result was falling literacy standards. Finally, in 2012 a new English curriculum once more mandated the teaching of grammar.¹¹⁸

Three teaching paradigms that are currently favoured, including in the ACT, are: student control over learning; inquiry-based learning, and the de-emphasis of the explicit teaching of phonics in learning to read.

Student control over learning

The idea of students having control over their own learning is not new. It has always been the case that with increasing age, ability and thinking maturity, students should take more control of their own learning and become independent lifelong learners.

The concern today is that the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. Given too much choice too early will limit students' exploration and growth; for example, teachers asking children to decide how to arrange furniture in an open classroom. Left with that decision, children will usually choose to sit with their friends and others can be excluded. As one educator noted, "Kids aren't qualified in educational design. They are not going to design a classroom with learning success in mind."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Dr Pauline Jones, in: "Grammar skipped two generations. It's back with purpose", *The Canberra Times*, Monday April 12, 2021; p 3

¹¹⁹ "Kids 'not up to' lessons in design", *The Weekend Australian*, 10-11 April 2021; p 3

In the same way that a doctor doesn't ask a child what treatment it needs to become well, in general decisions about teaching and learning should be made by teachers: they have an expert view on what the student needs to enable learning.

Children aren't young for long. We need to ensure that we maximise the learning we can help them achieve in the short time that they are at school.

Inquiry-based learning

With Inquiry-based learning, students are presented with a problem or question which they need to solve through questioning, investigation and research. This learning approach, together with student-centred learning, has been embraced in the ACT.

Inquiry-based learning per se is an excellent learning tool. The issue is not that it shouldn't be used; the issue is that before inquiry-based learning can be useful, students need to be given explicit teaching of basic concepts and ideas. Without learning the "language" of a subject, it is not possible to conduct inquiry-based learning effectively.

When you are learning something new, you need a greater proportion of surface to deep thinking, but as you become more proficient, the balance can change to more deep thinking. Consider, for example, the following seemingly sane and sensible teaching programmes privileging deep learning: inquiry-based learning; individualised instruction; matching teaching to

styles of thinking; problem-based learning; whole-language learning; and student control over learning.

The average effect-sizes of these programmes are very low (0.31, 0.22, 0.17, 0.15, 0.06 and 0.04 respectively), well below the average of many possible influences of 0.4. It is not that they are not worthwhile programmes.

The problem is that too often they are implemented in a way that does not develop surface understanding first.¹²⁰

Phonics

Phonics teaches the relationships between written letters and the sounds they represent. These relationships are the building blocks of learning to read.

There is increasing evidence that student teachers are not being equipped with the range of skills they need to be able to teach effectively. The attitude of many universities has been "phonics is bad". After analysing scores of University teaching degrees across Australia, one comprehensive study concluded that many teaching degrees do not provide sufficient instruction to student teachers in how to teach Reading.¹²¹ The result is that graduate teachers enter classrooms without the necessary "toolbox" of teaching techniques, including the ability to teach structured phonics.

¹²⁰ Hattie, J. (2015) *The Politics of Distraction*, Pearson; p 15

¹²¹ Buckingham, J. and Meeks, L., July 2019: *Short-changed: Preparation to teach reading in initial teacher education*, Five from Five

States such as South Australia and New South Wales, have recently introduced phonics screening checks in Year 1. NSW has gone further, with requiring all schools to teach phonics.¹²²

When learning a second language, the key starting points are phonics and grammar - you need to understand how to put a sentence together, as in the case of preserving the Aboriginal Wirldi language (see Box). Learning to read and write English as a first language is no different.

The Aboriginal Wirldi Language

The Aboriginal Wirldi language has been codified recently in an interactive online dictionary to help stave off the loss of the language. That dictionary includes an explanation of key sounds in the language as they are represented in the Roman alphabet (phonics); and sentence structure (grammar).

“Aboriginal languages are traditionally oral languages with complicated verb and pronoun systems”, and “a different sentence structure” from English.¹²³

3.3.4 Course Content in Teaching Degrees

It’s about how we teach children the intricacies of how their writing system works and whether this teaching is delivered by educators who are themselves highly knowledgeable about the structure of English or have only a superficial set of instructional tools that are doomed to leave a significant proportion of students behind.¹²⁴

The skill set that student teachers acquire at university makes an enormous difference to their effectiveness as teachers in the classroom. For some years there has been concern about whether university course content is influenced too much by trends in teaching theory and practice that are too focused on particular paradigms, for example critical theory (critiquing and changing society); or whole of language learning (where phonics, the sounding out of words, is de-emphasised).

With regard to the teaching of literacy, research in 2019 suggested that there is a “need for urgent and dramatic improvement in initial teacher education”.¹²⁵ In that detailed study, 116 Australian university teacher education literacy units (subjects) were reviewed. It was found:

- Only five (4%) of the 116 literacy units reviewed had a specific focus on early reading instruction or early literacy; that is, how to teach beginning readers in the first few years of school.
- Of the six most commonly prescribed textbooks for the literacy units, none contained sufficiently accurate and detailed content that would allow graduate teachers to use effective, evidence-based instruction.

We need initial teacher education in every university to prepare students to teach using a wide range of proven, effective techniques.

¹²² Urban, R. Jan 23-24 2021: “Phonics is back, and educators say it should guide how children are taught to read”, Inquirer, *The Weekend Australian*; p 16

¹²³ <https://wirldi.com.au/language-outline/>

¹²⁴ Snow, P. in Urban, R. Jan 23-24 2021: “Phonics is back, and educators say it should guide how children are taught to read”, Inquirer, *The Weekend Australian*; p 16

¹²⁵ Buckingham, J. and Meeks, L.: July 2019: *Short-changed: Preparation to Teach Reading in Initial Teacher Education*. Available at <https://fivefromfive.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ITE-REPORT-FINAL.pdf>

3.4 // Curriculum

Whilst all Australian jurisdictions teach the Australian Curriculum, every State and Territory has the discretion to tailor the curriculum to their particular needs.

In April 2021 the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority released a consultation draft of the first major review of that curriculum in nine years. Meanwhile, a comprehensive NSW Curriculum Review released in June 2020¹²⁶ discussed features of the Australian and global educational landscape strongly applicable in the ACT, including:

1. Advances in technologies and globalisation mean that students live in a world of change, with associated changes in future employment possibilities.
2. These new opportunities will require higher levels of academic achievement in certain fields, as low-skill jobs of the past are increasingly serviced by robotics.
3. Whilst higher levels of academic achievement, particular in Literacy, Numeracy, and Science (including Technology) are now important, the trajectory of achievement in NSW and other Australian jurisdictions is actually in the other direction.

There is widespread agreement that the Australian Curriculum needs to be simplified in order to allow a sharper focus on the mastery of Literacy and Numeracy in primary school, and the focusing

The imperative to improve curriculum content is driven by “the risk of growing numbers of students being left unemployable and economically disadvantaged throughout their lives, with likely implications for increasing social inequalities and tensions.”

Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion: Designs for a new school curriculum NSW Education Standards Authority, 2020; p xi

of secondary school on subjects that will optimise students’ opportunities to become lifelong learners, active contributors to society and able to take their place in the workforce.

The issues with delivery and content of the current curriculum in the ACT include:

1. Variability between schools as to what is taught;
2. The curriculum is too cluttered, particularly in primary school, leading to a decreased focus on essential Literacy and Numeracy skills;
3. Content is too shallow, not encouraging deep thinking;
4. The curriculum in high school and college does not encourage tackling more difficult subjects

¹²⁶ Masters, G. et al, 2020: *Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion: Designs for a new school curriculum*. NSW Education Standards Authority. April. Available at: https://nswcurriculumreform.nesa.nsw.edu.au/pdfs/phase-3/final-report/NSW_Curriculum_Review_Final_Report.pdf

(i.e., the ones that are needed increasingly in future jobs). As the Office of the Chief Scientist reported in 2020:

Amongst other factors such as perceived difficulty and increasing numbers of out-of-field teachers, diminishing mathematics and science prerequisite requirements for undergraduate university entry in Australia is likely to be contributing to the decline in student uptake of such subjects in secondary schools nationally over the past decade.¹²⁷

5. Too much subject choice in the curriculum diffuses focus on developing and extending important central knowledge and skills acquisition across all ages.

3.5 // ACT Labor's Approach

In 2018 the *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (the “Gonski Report”) found that in order to sustain continuous improvement in education, schools need access to “valid and reliable evidence of effective teaching practice; independent and rigorous evaluations of commercial and other teaching and education interventions.”¹²⁸

Continuous improvement in any organisation or sector, including an Education system, relies on a cycle of identifying opportunities to improve; planning what needs to be done; executing the plan; and reviewing performance.

In the ACT, there are many examples of attempts to improve educational outcomes through new policies or programs, which at first glance would seem welcome. But it is clear that these attempts are not succeeding, as the long-term decline in Literacy and Numeracy outcomes, and the failure to achieve six of seven performance targets in 2019-20, attest.

What is needed is a comprehensive overhaul of the ACT Education System in its entirety. Part A of this paper points to the range of areas in which there are issues. But these issues need to be fully articulated and dealt with.

A central issue is failure to use pertinent, rigorous evidence in decision making. There is an apparent absence of an evidence-based decision-making framework to justify policies developed. Although the ACT Education Directorate’s *Strategic Plan 2018-21* includes “evidence-informed decisions” as one of its five goals,¹²⁹ in policy after policy; intervention after intervention; a compelling evidence base for decision making is not presented.

¹²⁷ Sept 2020: *Mapping University Prerequisites in Australia*, Office of the Chief Scientist

¹²⁸ Gonski, D. Arcus, T. Boston, K. et al , 2018: *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*; p xvi

¹²⁹ ACT Education Directorate, 2018: *Strategic Plan 2018-21*; no page number



Figure 8: The Four Functions of Management
(adapted from Fayol's model)

At the other end - ensuring that any policies that are implemented actually work - there is little evidence of the exercise of the function of management known as “Control”. This essential component of evaluation: measuring actual performance against clear targets; identifying what went right or wrong and why; and adjusting operations, accordingly, seems to be under-represented in every aspect of the ACT Education system, and in its subsystems such as Teacher Education, or High School/College to work pathways. This observation applies not only to Education, but to every other sector in the ACT, including for example: Health; Infrastructure; Land releases and Building Codes.

Figure 8 represents the “Four Functions” of management, applicable to any organisation. In the ACT Education context, the management cycle of planning, organising, leading and controlling is broken due to the failure to monitor, review and revise strategic

directions, policies, and programs, and to feed that information into the next iteration of planning. The essential ingredient in continuous improvement - *Evaluation* - is absent.

It is not a co-incidence that both the continuous improvement cycle, and the functions of management cycle, both start with (evidence-based) Planning, and cycle through to Review of performance, feeding back once more to Planning.

Without a new emphasis on decisions based on the essential combination of evidence-based Planning and evidence-based Review, even with dedicated professionals and teachers, outcomes for the students of the ACT will not improve. They deserve better.

3.6 // Summary

Chronic underperformance in ACT Literacy, Numeracy and Science outcomes is revealed by longitudinal data from multiple highly regarded research institutions and assessment processes in the ACT; nationally; and internationally.

The causes are systemic. Over time a complex interplay of factors under the control of the ACT government have combined to create a stagnating system that is overdue for re- invigoration.

With regard to ACT Education system structures, the longstanding model of school autonomy has led to increasingly local-level decision making and management being devolved to school leaders, increasing workload for school leaders, blurring their necessary focus on their core business of educating students; and producing considerable variability and inequality within the government school system.

Equity of access to education remains a real issue for some groups of students, particularly for the economically disadvantaged, and First Nations Australians.

Meanwhile, education funding, which although the second highest in Australia, appears to be spent on policies that make little difference to student outcomes. The government school system is plagued with capacity issues, and ageing infrastructure maintenance is under-funded. There appears to be little formal evaluation and review of policies and programs, with the result that professed attention to “evidence-based decision making” is lip service only.

At the school level, leadership variability and staff turnover, leave or lack of regular relief teachers means

that not every school provides an optimal environment for teaching and learning to thrive. Although most teachers feel connected to their school, only slightly more than half of students do, and their parents not much better.

Bullying and even violence are issues in some schools in playgrounds, classrooms and towards staff, and there is no overarching policy on these and other matters such as use of personal mobile devices, or technology in classrooms, which would benefit from a unified approach within the system.

Teacher training is ripe for review, given low ATARs and no pre-requisites for students wishing to gain a University teaching qualification. Further, it is arguable that curriculum content in teaching degrees does not provide students with the full range of teaching knowledge and skills they need in the classroom due to trends in teaching practice that have not proven to be effective.

In schools, teacher workloads are an issue, as is the workforce composition; and there are chronic shortages of teachers in maths, science, languages, and teacher librarians. The shortage of male teachers across the board but particularly in primary schools means a lack of positive male role models for students.

Research suggests that the Australian Curriculum which is adapted by individual ACT schools, is too crowded in content and dissipates the concentration that needs to be trained on the acquisition of strong literacy and numeracy skills as the foundation of future learning and employment.

It's time to re-set Education in the ACT.



ACT Liberal Five Point Strategy for Change: AT A GLANCE

Bringing Out the Best in Every Child

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>1. Improving Falling Academic Standards</p> <p><i>Exceptional Teaching + Focused Curriculum</i></p> | <p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review all aspects of teacher education to ensure that our dedicated teachers are equipped with the tools and support they need to provide strong learning gain for every student, in every year of schooling • Establish the building blocks for literacy and numeracy in the early learning years • Streamline the curriculum in primary and secondary schools to enable the essential skills for jobs and lifelong learning to be developed • Ensure a full range of academically challenging subjects for high schools and colleges |
| <p>2. Genuine Equity for Every Student</p> <p><i>Creating Real Opportunity</i></p> | <p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make equity of access to education a reality for every student, regardless of indigenous or other background, ability, gender, economic disadvantage, or any other need • Consult with the community and stakeholders on how best to meet the needs of disadvantaged students and implement findings • Create environments that bring out the best in every child |
| <p>3. Reducing Bullying and Violence</p> <p><i>Stronger Leadership + Positive School Cultures</i></p> | <p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce bullying and violence in schools by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working with communities and families to make our schools safer; and - focusing on the recommendations of the Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools • Develop outstanding school leaders with the ability to establish strong positive school cultures that enable students and staff to flourish • Create a supportive and challenging education environment that encourages high achievement, and embraces diversity |
| <p>4. More Support for Schools through Better Funding and Governance</p> <p><i>More Effective Funding + Better Governance</i></p> | <p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in rigorous, timely evaluation of policies and programs to ensure money is spent on what works • Re-balance ACT education governance to achieve a strong united framework for government schooling that blends clear common objectives with flexible school autonomy • Develop school autonomy structures to better support school leaders to focus on learning and teaching excellence • Provide faster, centralised data analysis and information to support evidence-based decisions for better learning outcomes |
| <p>5. Fixing Overcrowded Schools + Ageing Infrastructure</p> <p><i>Realistic Planning + Better Management</i></p> | <p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve school capacity planning to better anticipate and meet demand • Review priority enrolment area guidelines • Reinvigorate ageing school infrastructure; and eliminate risk from toxic materials • Revise systems of school infrastructure management for more efficient outcomes |

4. // Our Vision: Bringing out the Best in Every Child

As the ACT enjoys the highest socio-economic advantage in Australia, Canberra Liberals believe that the ACT Education system can and should deliver learning outcomes for our children and young people that reflect that advantage.

Every child, no matter their background or ability, should be provided with the best possible learning experiences to enable them to participate in employment and society to their full potential, whatever that may look like for them: mechanic, teacher, software engineer, medical researcher, pastry chef, astrophysicist, entrepreneur, plumber, public servant, or artist.

Our vision is therefore:

To bring out the best in every child, regardless of their background or ability.

Today and in the future, jobs at any level will require the ability to learn new things quickly; to be flexible; to utilise technology; to communicate effectively.

We know that for over a decade, the ACT education system has been underperforming in literacy and numeracy. We know that if these critical foundations for lifelong learning are not established early, and cemented in place during the primary school years, a young person's progress through secondary school and technical or further education will be less successful, and their ability to achieve their full potential in life impacted.

We know that the problems with education outcomes in the ACT are systemic, and that the key areas of concern are: system structures and funding; leadership and culture; teacher education and practice; and curriculum.

The good news is that all of these factors are within the control of government. They can be improved, continuously, through policy, funding and program initiatives that target the problems within each of these areas.

In order to focus our efforts to achieve better education outcomes for every child, five priorities have been identified: Improving Falling Academic Standards; Genuine Equity for Every Student; Reducing Bullying and Violence; More Support for Schools through Better Funding and Governance; and Fixing Overcrowded Schools + Ageing Infrastructure (Figure 9).

These five priorities have been chosen because of two evidence bases: firstly, the evidence that points to what is not working in the ACT education system; and secondly, the evidence that points to what does work to produce consistent high-quality learning outcomes for students.

Young people have hungry minds. They are curious, and keen to devour new ideas and knowledge. They want to know how things work, and why. They love to imagine what might be possible. Set out below is our strategy for guiding that thirst for knowledge through learning opportunities that inspire and challenge every child to become the best they can be.



Better Education Outcomes

Bringing out the Best in Every Child

Figure 9

✓
Improving Falling Academic Standards

✓
Genuine Equity for Every Student

✓
Reducing Bullying and Violence

✓
More Support for Schools through Better Funding & Governance

✓
Fixing Overcrowded Schools & Ageing Infrastructure

5. // The Strategy: What Works

Whole-of-system policy settings determine the outcomes of any education system. Settings that emphasise and reward teacher professionalism and quality; school and system leadership; working to improve outcomes across the entire school system; ...the sharing of effective teaching practices; high expectations for every student; strong school cultures; ... are key areas that have proven effective in raising outcomes.¹³⁰

At the system level, policy settings create the supportive environment in which all students have the opportunity to thrive. These policy priorities must rest on a strong evidence base.

The definitive body of work on factors affecting student learning has been building over 25 years as the brainchild and under the supervision of Professor John Hattie of the University of Melbourne. More than 90,000 national and international studies on every aspect of school teaching and learning have been reviewed. From these many thousands of studies, every conceivable factor that influences learning outcomes has been identified, and for each, their impact on learning measured.

And after decades of research, the results are unsurprising, yet reassuring. The six most important factors that influence learning are: Teacher; Teaching; Curricula; School; Student; and Home.

Unsurprising, because these factors comprise the experience of every

¹³⁰ Masters, G. Dec 2014: Is School Reform Working? *Policy Insights*, Australian Council for Educational Research ; p 7. Available at www.acer.edu.au

¹³¹ The Hon Alan Tudge, Federal Minister for Education, 27 April 2021 "Lifting Australia's school performance: Lessons from abroad" *The Age Schools Summit*

child: their innate ability; their home environment; their teachers and teaching methods; what they are taught and in what school environment.

Reassuring, because out of these six effects, four are under the control of the Education System: School; Curricula; Teacher; and Teaching. These four factors comprise 69.3% of the effects on student learning (Figure 10).

In other words, almost 70% of the factors that affect student learning are under the control of an Education system and can therefore be improved through introducing effective policy settings.

Case Example: The UK's "V-shaped turnaround"

In 2009, the UK hit a low point in its PISA reading performance, falling to the OECD average level, ranked 25th in the world – 16 places below Australia. In less than a decade, average PISA reading scores had fallen 30 points – equal to a year's worth of learning. However, over the next 9 years, its performance steadily improved, and by 2018, the UK had jumped ahead of Australia in every domain – reading, maths and science.

How did they do it? They overhauled the curriculum, focusing on two key elements of academic success: establishing the building blocks of literacy and numeracy early on; and enshrining high expectations for every child, with a stretching knowledge-based curriculum. ... They relentlessly focused on the core elements of high-performing school systems. Most of all, they brought in measures to improve quality teaching.¹³¹



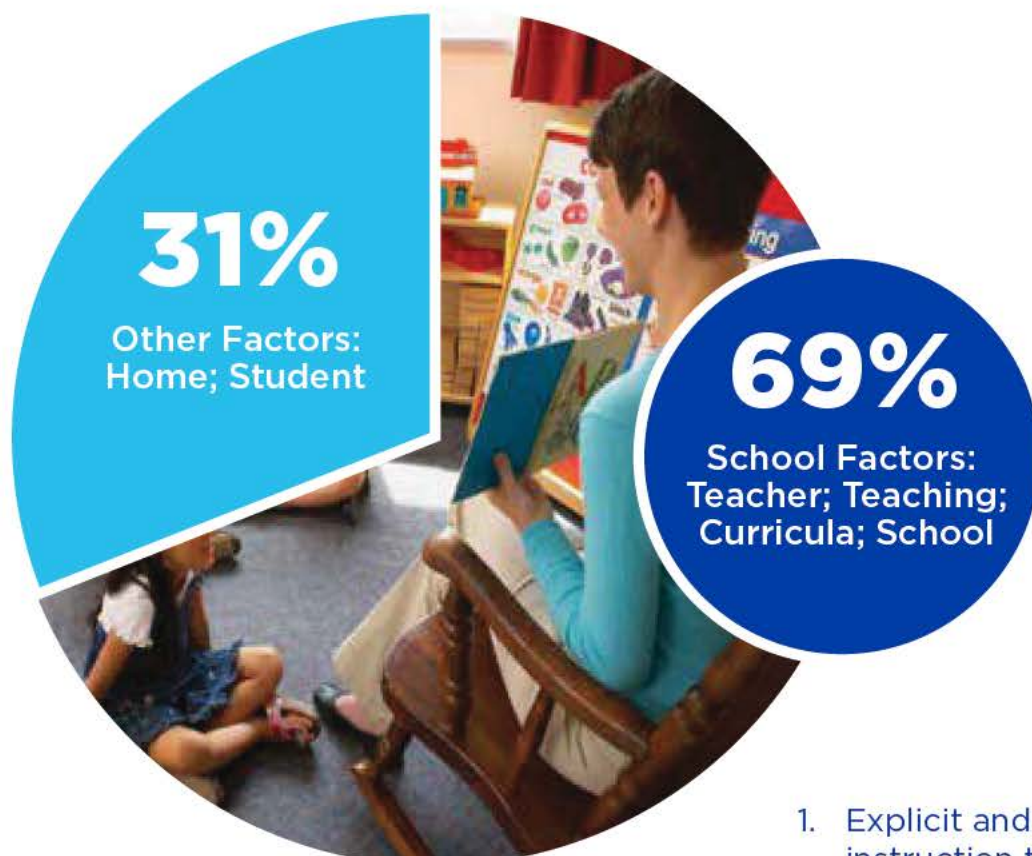


Figure 10: Over 69% of factors that have a high impact on student learning are under the control of schools

(Information graphic created using data from *Visible Learning*.)¹³²

5.1 // Improving Falling Academic Standards: Exceptional Teaching + Focused Curriculum

Of the four factors under the control of education systems, Teacher Characteristics and Teaching Skills are by far the most important: they account for almost 40% of student learning variability.¹³³

Every adult can remember the names of a few exceptional teachers who made a profound impact on them. Teachers are the key to student learning; and teacher passion is more important than anything else. Effective teachers are skilled at using simple tools that work:¹³⁴

1. Explicit and engaging teacher-led instruction to provide students with the basic language and concepts to begin learning any new skill or subject;
2. Describing clear criteria so that students know what to aim for;
3. Showing what success looks like by modeling what students need to do;
4. Setting “goldilocks” goals; that is, goals that are moderately difficult, but attainable; and
5. Providing many opportunities for challenge and practice.

Every graduating teacher needs to be well-versed in these powerful teaching skills. In Victoria for example, ten instructional strategies known as HITS (High Impact Teaching Strategies) incorporate these and other essential teaching strategies.¹³⁵

¹³² Hattie, J. *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. First published 2009

¹³³ Hattie, J. *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. First published 2009

¹³⁴ Adapted from Hattie, J. 2015: *What Works Best in Education? The politics of Collaborative Expertise*. Pearson

¹³⁵ Victorian Department of Education and Training: *High impact teaching strategies*, available at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/practice/improve/Pages/hits.aspx?Redirect=1>

5.1.1 Teacher Quality

Top-performing education systems set high standards for who becomes a teacher... The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.¹³⁶

Countries in which there has been an improvement in student performance over recent decades have placed a particular priority on building teachers' capacities (knowledge and skills) to deliver more effective teaching.¹³⁷ Indeed, in early 2021 the Australian federal government announced a review into initial teacher education.

A recent report by the Grattan Institute in which 700 Australian teachers and principals were surveyed, concluded that Australia needs an expert career path for top teachers, in which two new roles for top teachers are created to improve teaching in every school. These roles would be prestigious, and well paid:

*'Master Teachers' (the top 1 per cent of the profession) would have no formal classroom load but would be the overall pedagogical leaders in their subjects, working across a network of schools in their region. They would help identify teacher needs and coordinate training. They would guide 'Instructional Specialists' (limited to 8 per cent of the workforce), who would split their time between classroom teaching and instructional leadership. Instructional Specialists would work in their own schools to support and guide other teachers.'*¹³⁸

With these factors in mind, it is clear that there needs to be a review of all aspects of teacher recruitment, education, and professional development to raise the professional standing of the teaching profession, and to ensure that our dedicated teachers are equipped with the tools they need to build high quality learning outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

¹³⁶ The Hon Alan Tudge MP, Minister for Education and Youth. 11 March 2021: *A world beating education*, Address delivered at Menzies Research Centre

¹³⁷ Masters, G. Dec 2014: *Is School Reform Working? Policy Insights*, Australian Council for Educational Research ; p 6. Available at www.acer.edu.au

¹³⁸ Goss, P. and Sonnemann, J., 9 Feb 2020: *Top teachers: sharing expertise to improve teaching*, Grattan Institute, available at <https://grattan.edu.au/report/top-teachers/>

Considerations for Teacher Quality:

1. Stronger guidelines for Tertiary package subject choice at college.
2. Raise minimum ATAR requirements.
3. Re-introduce pre-requisites for teaching degrees.
4. Ensure university Teaching degrees cover all necessary teaching practices, skills, and theoretical approaches to equip new teachers with a varied range of teaching techniques, especially in teaching literacy and numeracy.
5. Ensure that the university teaching degree accreditation process of the ACT Teacher Quality Institute carefully considers course content, breadth, and depth.
6. Establish challenging career paths to attract high performing students to teaching.
7. Raise the status of the teaching profession through pay incentives for higher qualifications (e.g., Master's Degree).
8. Review pathways and incentives to facilitate applicants with qualifications in other disciplines to transition into teaching.
9. Undertake recruitment programs to attract specialist teachers in Maths, Science, Languages, and Teacher Librarians, and more male teachers to the profession.

In the workforce:

10. Review the amount of classroom teaching done by ITE (Initial Teacher Education) students. Is too much teaching done by inexperienced teachers?
11. Relief teaching: create more certainty around relief teachers in classrooms, through establishing teaching pools attached to schools/districts.
12. Introduce in-class teacher reviews by senior peers as an aid to teachers more rapidly being able to develop their teaching practices. Review and mentoring by Lead Teachers would also provide a career progression for classroom teachers to a teaching/supervisory role where their expertise could be shared with others.
13. Establish strong, current, and relevant professional learning programs and opportunities linked to career pathways, such as Master Teachers and Instructional Specialists.
14. Benchmark national and international policies that are effective in raising teaching standards and learning outcomes.

5.1.2 Focus on Literacy and Numeracy

Children and young people continue to develop literacy and numeracy skills throughout their formal schooling, from Early Years learning to the end of college, and beyond. Attention to the development of these skills needs to be ongoing through formal education.

Considerations to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Outcomes:

1. Start skills development early. Ensure that the groundwork for literacy and numeracy learning begins in pre-school, using play-based and other suitable approaches.
2. Involve parents to support literacy and numeracy progression at home.
3. Ensure every child is assessed on their literacy and numeracy starting point on entry to Kindergarten, and that this information is used to determine appropriate teaching strategies for that child.
4. Use formative, informal assessment items frequently in years K-2 to track students' progress, and to provide them with extra support if necessary, at the earliest opportunity. Problems identified and corrected early will save a child months or years of frustration and slow progress with their schooling.
5. Introduce a literacy and numeracy baseline assessment at the start of Year 7, to enable learning support to be provided in these essential areas if required.
6. Provide a range of effective diagnostic assessments online for every age group so that teachers have ready access to tools that work.¹³⁹
7. Provide faster, clearer centralised data analysis services on large-scale external assessments to make it easier for school leaders and teachers to incorporate that information into continuously improving learning outcomes.
8. Create a consistent and effective program for teaching literacy and numeracy across government schools, so that every school is maximising their students' learning gain. For example, explicit teaching is very effective for literacy and numeracy instruction; and explicit phonics instruction should be part of every school's literacy program, "embedded in an integrated reading program that includes all of the other elements".¹⁴⁰
9. Identify methods of reading and literacy support that have proven effective in lifting outcomes, for example: the Tasmanian Literacy Coach approach to support students.¹⁴¹
10. Evaluate existing literacy and numeracy support programs to ensure that funding flows only to those that have a clear positive impact on learning outcomes.
11. Review the roles of printed texts and materials, and digital texts and online learning, to ensure that students are provided with information in the format that best supports them in gaining comprehension skills. Recent research suggests that for the development of comprehension, print-based reading is more effective than digital; and that digital reading is impacted by multitasking, which decreases engagement with information.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ For example, as recommended in the *NSW Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2017-2020*

¹⁴⁰ Buckingham, J.: *Five from Five Project*, CIS. <https://fivefromfive.com.au/>. Accessed 13 April 2021

¹⁴¹ Baker, E. 22 Nov 2020. 'Embedding literacy coaches "absolute gold" for one Tasmanian primary school', *ABC News*

¹⁴² Baron, Naomi S. 2021: *How We Read*, Oxford University Press



5.1.3 Streamlined Curriculum

Curriculum review is on the agenda of many countries. As of 2021, a major review of the Australian curriculum is in progress. In April, the Federal Minister of Education stated that: “We will have a more streamlined, coherent and focused Australian Curriculum ready to be implemented from Term 1 next year.”¹⁴³

The NSW Education Standards Authority ¹⁴⁴ has conducted its own comprehensive review, released in 2020: *Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion: Designs for a New School Curriculum*. That report recommends a tighter, more appropriate curriculum from which to select content for teaching and learning.

Clearly a more focused curriculum that ensures early development of foundational literacy and numeracy skills is needed in Australia; and in the interests of equity, the ACT must ensure that government schools maintain a consistent approach in teaching it.

Considerations for Curriculum Review:

1. Consult with other Australian jurisdictions (for example NSW) on moves to simplify and streamline primary and secondary school curriculums to enable the essential skills for lifelong learning to be developed and consolidated in engaging and relevant subject contexts.
2. Develop a unified ACT government school policy on the implementation of the new Australian curriculum.
3. Review secondary school guidelines to ensure every student is able to take a suitably challenging subject on every “line” of study, if they choose to do so.
4. Review college curriculums to reduce the proliferation of subjects. The dissipation of focus that arises through too many offerings not only makes it more difficult for students to achieve mastery of core capabilities for lifelong learning; it also has implications for teaching costs and staffing.

¹⁴³ The Hon Alan Tudge, Federal Minister for Education, 27 April 2021 “Lifting Australia’s school performance: Lessons from abroad” *The Age Schools Summit*

¹⁴⁴ Masters, G. April 2020: *Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion*, NSW Education Standards Authority

5.2 // Genuine Equity for All Students: Creating Real Opportunity

It is surely a fundamental role of schooling to enable anyone to climb out of a lower socio-economic situation.¹⁴⁵

The first goal of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) is: “The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity.” This important statement of educational goals for Australia makes it clear that excellence and equity are not mutually exclusive concepts. Arguably, excellence cannot be claimed in an education system that is not truly equitable.

Equity is not “one size fits all”. Genuine equity for all students, and creating real opportunity for them, will look different for every student. But regardless of the particular requirements for individual students or groups, every student deserves structured teaching, support and guidance that enables them to reach their potential whether their need stems from disadvantage, ethnicity, giftedness, or any other source.

Although the ACT is fortunate in that it has relatively little disadvantage when compared with other Australian jurisdictions, this does not mean that inequities do not exist. Due to the composition of Canberra’s suburbs, economic disadvantage tends to be distributed across the city, rather than concentrated in one or two areas - so in some ways is less “visible”.

In addition to this “hidden” socio-economic disadvantage, there are many other types of disadvantage that affect engagement with education, many of them intersecting. As a Youth Coalition and ACTCOSS *Issues Paper on Educational Inequity in the ACT* points out, these include young people who may:¹⁴⁶

- have a disability;
- have had an out of home care experience;
- identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander;
- be from a culturally and linguistically diverse background;
- be experiencing mental ill health;
- be a carer;
- be experiencing homelessness;
- identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex;
- be involved in the justice system;
- have parents who are incarcerated; and/or,
- be a young parent.

Another important issue that impacts equity, and at times intersects with the next section in this paper: 5.3 Reducing Bullying and Violence, is challenging behaviours. As the *Report of the Expert Panel on Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviour*¹⁴⁷ observed (see right).

¹⁴⁵ Hattie, J. 2015: *What Doesn't Work: The Politics of Distraction*, Pearson; p 6

¹⁴⁶ The Youth Coalition of the ACT and ACTCOSS, July 2015: *Issues Paper: Educational Inequity in the ACT*; p 6

¹⁴⁷ Shaddock, A. et al, Nov 2015: *REPORT OF THE EXPERT PANEL ON STUDENTS WITH COMPLEX NEEDS AND CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR*; p 12