

Comment on the interim report of the Review of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA)

The national School Library Coalition welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on this landmark report. The School Library Coalition comprises seven national and state-based associations, representing school library professionals and paraprofessionals in Australia. The Coalition was formed to pursue the shared goal that, “All students in Australia should have equitable access to quality school library services delivered by qualified school library staff”, and supports the Students Need School Libraries campaign.¹

1. An identified data gap - school libraries

School libraries have measurable positive impact on student outcomes and wellbeing, and support quality teaching, as outlined in detail below. Despite this, there is currently no requirement for governments to ensure that students or teachers have access to a school library, and no systematic data collection and reporting that would allow ongoing monitoring.¹

In the states where some data has been provided this is often so wide as to be unusable, with examples of ICT or computer rooms being included within the definition of library.

Recommendation:

That state and territory governments collect and report on school libraries as part of the reporting requirements of the NSRA. An agreed definition of a school library should be established, and governments should use this when reporting on:

- FTE allocation and qualifications of library staff
- Library resource budget
- Library opening hours, including whether the library is open for children outside of allocated class times.

Recommendation

That the Australian Education Resource Organisation (AERO) establish a research program on school libraries, commencing with a national census of school libraries and school library staffing.

2. Ongoing decline in school libraries threatens students' outcomes and wellbeing and contributes to inequitable results.

The limited evidence that exists shows a steady decline in the provision of school library services, especially within the public school sector and in regional and remote areas, with subsequent impact on student outcomes, wellbeing and quality teaching as outlined in more detail below.

The most comprehensive recent school library census was undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The *School Libraries in South Australia 2019 Census* indicated that students' reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation outcomes at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 were positively associated with the qualification level of the person managing the library. The study concluded that students in schools with a qualified teacher librarian can have up to two months' learning gain when compared to students in schools where no qualified person managed the library, with the impact most notable at year 9 level. Of the 728 schools surveyed, over half the school libraries (55%) were managed on the equivalent of less than a half-time position.

¹ Students Need School Libraries. (2020). Students Need School Libraries campaign.
<https://studentsneedschoollibraries.org.au/>

Concerningly, the study also found that 51% of staff managing South Australian school libraries are not library-qualified, and 36% of staff are SSO/ESOs with neither teaching nor library qualifications. Small (<400 students) remote schools in disadvantaged communities were least likely to have any library staff. Library budgets were also a concern, with the library resource budget per student ranging from \$1 to \$250. As the report notes “The fact that 15% of small schools budget \$5 per student for library resources is of particular concern, as this cannot provide an adequate collection of literacy, literature and learning resources.”

Recommendation:

That minimum standards for the provision of school libraries including staffing and resourcing are established and implemented as a condition of the next NSRA.

2.1 Lifting outcomes for all students

Teacher librarians can play a pivotal role in developing quality targeted support for students who have fallen behind. Teacher librarians are both teachers and information specialists, working with students, teachers, school management, and wider school communities to provide whole-school leadership in literacy programs that foster and embed a reading culture, digital skills and information literacy throughout their school communities.²²

The specialist expertise of qualified teacher librarians can play a significant role in decreasing the educational barriers experienced by students from priority equity cohorts including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and children, and young people with disability.

2.2 Student wellbeing

We know that anecdotally, well resourced and adequately staffed school libraries can have significant impact on the wellbeing of students. Promising findings on how school libraries operate as safe spaces for young people; promote and resource mental health and wellbeing initiatives; and, support and promote bibliotherapeutic practices and reading for pleasure, are useful starting points for furthering this research agenda.³

School libraries are essential if we are to ensure equity of access to information in an increasingly digital world, attendance to diversity and inclusion, and student wellbeing.⁴ In the absence of well-resourced school libraries with qualified staff, these essential activities either do not occur or fall on the shoulders of already overburdened classroom teachers.⁵

Guaranteed resourcing for school libraries and school library staff is a common step that Australian, State and Territory Governments could take in the next intergovernmental agreement to improve student wellbeing on a national level.

2.3 Diversity

Closely tied in with student wellbeing is a school's capacity to effectively support students with diverse needs. This includes learning difficulties, social and emotional wellbeing, gender identity and diverse cultural or religious backgrounds. In addition to providing a safe and welcoming physical environment for all students, qualified school library staff can expertly

² Australian Education Union (SA Branch). (2021). School Library Staffing Policy. https://www.aeusa.asn.au/Web/Policies/School_library_staffing.aspx

³ Merga, M. (2020). How can school libraries support student wellbeing? Evidence and implications for further research. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01930826.2020.1773718#.Xvx2zFB115U.twitter>

⁴ Dearnaley, M. (2020). A snapshot of a school library during COVID-19. Access, 34(2), 22–25.

Merga, M. K. (2022). School libraries supporting literacy and wellbeing. London, Facet Publishing.

Raffaele, D. (2021). Cultivating the 'Third Place' in school libraries to support student wellbeing. Synergy, 19(1). <https://slav.vic.edu.au/index.php/Synergy/article/view/489>

⁵ Garrison, K., & FitzGerald, L. (2019). 'It trains your Brain': Student reflections on using the Guided Inquiry Design Process. Synergy, 15(2). <https://slav.vic.edu.au/index.php/Synergy/article/view/v15220179>

Lance, K. C. & Kachel, D. E. (2018). Why school librarians matter: What years of research tell us. Phi Delta Kappan, 99(7), 15-20.

curate a library collection that is responsive to diverse needs and supports students to feel validated and seen.⁶

2.4 Supporting teachers

Resourcing of school libraries can reduce the drivers of teacher attrition. We know that teachers benefit immensely from having a well-resourced school library managed by qualified staff. Essential library-based activities such as resourcing the curriculum, collaborative planning, teaching information and digital literacy, promoting whole school reading, and maintaining a supportive and nurturing environment are core building blocks for a school culture where teaching staff feel supported.

Funding of a national census of school libraries and staffing to identify areas of need and support workforce planning should be linked to plans to reduce teacher workload.

2.5 School leadership

A qualified teacher librarian is perfectly positioned to innovate, lead, advise, support or implement whole school initiatives. A strong body of national⁷ and international⁸ research highlights the positive impact of school libraries managed by qualified staff on student achievement.

Qualified teacher librarians are already school leaders and provide vital connections between the Australian Curriculum's general capabilities, state and territory education departments' focus areas, and the classroom teacher. They make strong contributions to the broader curriculum leadership of a school and are trained to model strong and effective leadership practices.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the Interim Report and would be happy to discuss this in more detail.

Yours sincerely

School Library Coalition



Australian Library and
Information Association



⁶ School-Libraries-The-Heart-of-21st-Century-Learning.pdf (2019) ACT Government.
https://www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1435435/School-Libraries-The-Heart-of-21st-Century-Learning.pdf

⁷ Hughes, H. (2013). School libraries and teacher-librarians: Evidence of their contribution to student literacy and learning. Curriculum and Leadership Journal, 11(12), 1-5

⁸ Scholastic Library Publishing. (2016). School libraries work! A compendium of research supporting the effectiveness of school libraries (2016 ed.). <http://www.scholastic.com/SLW2016>

References

- Australian Education Union (SA Branch). (2021). School Library Staffing Policy.
https://www.aeusa.asn.au/Web/Policies/School_library_staffing.aspx
- Dearnaley, M. (2020). A snapshot of a school library during COVID-19. *Access*, 34(2), 22–25.
- Dix, K., Felgate, R., Ahmed, S., Carslake, T., & Sniedze-Gregory, S. (2020). School libraries in South Australia 2019 Census. Australian Council for Educational Research.
<https://doi.org/10.37517/978-1-74286-583-6>
- Garrison, K., & FitzGerald, L. (2019). 'It trains your Brain': Student reflections on using the Guided Inquiry Design Process. *Synergy*, 15(2).
<https://slav.vic.edu.au/index.php/Synergy/article/view/v15220179>
- Hughes, H. (2013). School libraries and teacher-librarians: Evidence of their contribution to student literacy and learning. *Curriculum and Leadership Journal*, 11(12), 1-5.
- Lance, K. C. & Kachel, D. E. (2018). Why school librarians matter: What years of research tell us. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 99(7), 15-20.
- Lonsdale, M. (2003). Impact of school libraries on student achievement: A review of the research (Report for the Australian School Library Association). Melbourne, Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). https://research.acer.edu.au/tll_misc/23
- Merga, M. (2020). How can school libraries support student wellbeing? Evidence and implications for further research.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01930826.2020.1773718#.Xvx2zFB115U.twitter>
- Merga, M. K. (2022). School libraries supporting literacy and wellbeing. London, Facet Publishing.
- Raffaele, D. (2021). Cultivating the 'Third Place' in school libraries to support student wellbeing. *Synergy*, 19(1). <https://slav.vic.edu.au/index.php/Synergy/article/view/489>
- Scholastic Library Publishing. (2016). School libraries work! A compendium of research supporting the effectiveness of school libraries (2016 ed.).
<http://www.scholastic.com/SLW2016>
- School-Libraries-The-Heart-of-21st-Century-Learning.pdf (2019) ACT Government.
https://www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1435435/School-Libraries-The-Heart-of-21st-Century-Learning.pdf
- Softlink. (2016). Softlink Australian School Library Survey: A five-year review. *Access*, 30(2), 26-32. <https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=134081305399604;res=IELHSS>
- Students Need School Libraries. (2020). Students Need School Libraries campaign.
<https://studentsneedschoollibraries.org.au/>