

Secretariat  
Inquiry into literacy and numeracy in the ACT  
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5 March 2024

Dear expert panel members,

***RE: Inquiry into literacy and numeracy in ACT public schools***

The ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) represents not-for-profit community organisations and works tirelessly for social justice in the ACT. We are a not-for-profit peak body, working collaboratively with organisations and individuals to create a collective voice, advocating for positive social change, and justice and self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our vision is for an inclusive Canberra where no one lives in poverty.

ACTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the ACT Government Education Directorate Inquiry into Literacy and Numeracy in ACT public schools. Education is a powerful tool for breaking the cycle of poverty and laying the foundation for more inclusive and equitable communities. Quality education provides individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to participate socially and economically, leading to increased income and improved living standards. This, in turn, can help reduce economic disparities within society.

Given the vital role of education in fostering social and economic inclusion and equity, ACTCOSS are deeply concerned about the stark and growing disparities that characterise the education system in the ACT. Our education system should be one that allows all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, to reach their full potential. Yet the ACT education system is one of the most inequitable in Australia, with the ACT having the worst relationship between socio economic status and performance of all jurisdictions except the Northern Territory (NT), in PISA assessments.<sup>1</sup> Disadvantaged students in the ACT are also falling behind in NAPLAN. The gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students in the ACT is about 1.5 years in Year 3 and increases to four years by Year 9. Priority equity cohorts such as students whose parents did not complete high school and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students perform significantly worse than their peers.

In addition to growing educational inequities, across-the-board educational outcomes for Australian school students, including for literacy and numeracy, have been deteriorating over the past two decades.<sup>2</sup> This overall

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<sup>1</sup> J Del Rio, H Noura, K Jones, A Sukkariéh, [Raising the grade: How schools in the Australian Capital Territory can lift literacy outcomes for students and the economy](#), Equity Economics, 2023

<sup>2</sup> OECD, [Education Policy Outlook, OECD, 10 April 2023](#), p 5, accessed 19 February 2024.

decline in educational outcomes is mirrored in the ACT, where a concerning number of schools are below national averages for NAPLAN literacy outcomes, the impact of which compounds as students move from primary to high school education.<sup>3</sup>

The following submission focuses on the structural, social and economic factors shaping the reduction in equity and overall educational outcomes in the ACT, with a focus on the non-curricular needs of children who experience inequities and how literacy and numeracy outcomes may be improved through inclusive practices and community engagement.

### The drivers of educational inequity

Efforts to lift numeracy and literacy outcomes need to be grounded in an understanding of the multiple factors that shape educational outcomes, including factors both within and outside educational settings. The Centre for Social Impact has identified eleven major drivers of inequity in education, as summarised in the table below.<sup>4</sup> These key drivers underscore that educational inequity is not a siloed issue; rather, it connects with other social and economic issues that can have varying degrees of influence on outcomes. The effect of inequity means socioeconomically disadvantaged or disenfranchised students in vulnerable contexts are likely to fare worse in participation and engagement in schooling and in achieving minimum proficiency standards in literacy and numeracy compared to their peers and the national average.

TABLE: Summary of inequity drivers outside and inside education settings

KEY DRIVERS OUTSIDE EDUCATION SETTINGS	KEY DRIVERS INSIDE EDUCATION SETTINGS
1. Poverty, resources and home environment	6. Standardised testing
2. Lack of accessible, responsive and affordable early childhood education and care	7. One-size-fits-all curriculum
3. Disconnection between education settings, home, and community	8. Teaching and staffing issues
4. Systems and structures – segregation and funding models	9. Bullying, discrimination and social isolation
5. Parent and family engagement	10. Absence of a whole-of-school approach
	11. Absence of student voice and agency

<sup>3</sup> J Del Rio, H Noura, K Jones and A Sukkarieh, [Raising the grade: How schools in the Australian Capital Territory can lift literacy outcomes for students and the economy, Equity](#) Economics, 2023, accessed 20 February 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Varadharajan M, Beuna P, Muir K, Moore T, Harris D, Barker B, Dakin P, Lowe K, Smith C, Baker S, Piccoli A, [Amplify Insights: Education Inequity. Part One: Drivers of Inequity](#), Centre for Social Impact, UNSW Sydney, 2021, <https://www.csi.edu.au/research/amplify-insights-education-inequity/>

In the ACT, it is widely recognised that the social and economic drivers identified above contribute to poorer educational outcomes for school students.<sup>5</sup> Evidence shows there are specific, often overlapping, demographic groups who disproportionately experience these social and economic disadvantages. They include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, student from families experiencing economic disadvantage, and students with a disability. These groups are not mutually exclusive, with some students falling into more than one category and therefore experiencing greater risk of poor outcomes.

Canberra has one of the highest proportions of economically diverse suburbs, with households experiencing significant poverty co-existing alongside households with relative wealth. This can have the effect of masking the effects of economic inequities on educational outcomes, with many ACT public schools having small numbers of highly disadvantaged students, rather than disadvantage being concentrated in a few schools.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, the existing data does reveal parts of the ACT where educational disadvantage is more pronounced. Schools with a higher concentration of high-earning families, typically in inner south or inner north suburbs, tend to have better outcomes than those in outer suburban areas such as Tuggeranong and Belconnen, including schools such as Logan and Burnie which have received Tackling Entrenched Disadvantage Funding.<sup>7,8</sup> Approaches to tackle the educational disadvantage associated with economic inequities will therefore need to take into account both the significant economic disparities *within* public schools in the ACT, in addition to approaches that take into account schools where disadvantage is more concentrated.

Despite the recognised drivers of educational inequities, responses in the ACT remain largely ad hoc and uncoordinated. It is clear improving literacy and numeracy outcomes will not be possible without addressing these underlying issues, and it is imperative efforts to revise curricula or teaching approaches are coupled with a diversity of measures that attend to social and economic factors beyond the school gate.

### **Community engagement and partnerships**

Public schools are not isolated siloes and should be connected into communities and the wider service system. Families and community services are key partners in identifying and coordinating essential services to bolster student learning and improve outcomes. This approach is consistent with the stated mission of the ACT Government's Education Directorate Strategic Plan, which seeks to ensure families and communities are welcomed and included in schools. For children facing multiple layers of disadvantage in their individual lives, it is

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<sup>5</sup> Del Rio J et al., [Raising the grade](#), 2023

<sup>6</sup> R Cuzzillo & R Ragless, [Issues Paper: Educational Inequity in the ACT](#), ACTCOSS and Youth Coalition ACT, 2015; ACT Education Directorate, [ACT Government submission to the Review of the socio-economic status score methodology](#), 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Healthy Schools Network ACT, [Southside Initiative Focus 2024](#), Healthy Schools Network ACT, 2024, accessed 19 February 2024.

<sup>8</sup> AM Dockery, R Cassells, A Duncan, G Gao and R Seymour, [Educate Australia Fair? Education inequality in Australia. BCEC Focus on the States](#), Perth, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, 2017.

all the more important their schools develop strong links with the community and that teachers do not carry sole responsibility for ensuring the next generation enjoys well-developed literacy and numeracy skills.

To improve educational outcomes, children facing inequities should have the supports that they need outside of the classroom. Ongoing investment in improving relationships between schools, families and the community is a precondition for improved outcomes in literacy and numeracy. This sort of strategy is often used in early education and care settings and is reflected in the National Quality Framework (NQF). NQF Area 6 asserts that “collaborative partnerships enhance children’s inclusion, learning and wellbeing”.<sup>9</sup> This remains true throughout the course of children’s engagement with education. In addition, community members may be a valuable resource for improving educational policy. As such, part of welcoming the community into schools should be to ensure that a broad range of community members are considered stakeholders and are meaningfully engaged in consultation processes.

ACTCOSS recommends an approach that incorporates both community members as well as community sector resources. The community hub model represents one particular approach to school-community partnerships. Community hubs are regarded as both a place and a set of partnerships between a school and other community resources that holistically support the needs of students.<sup>10</sup> Effective school-based community hubs can foster “collaboration between school education systems and the other sectors to support the learning and wellbeing of young people, especially those facing disadvantage”.<sup>11</sup>

Developing stronger linkages between schools, communities and community services requires sufficient resourcing, funding mechanisms that enable cross-sector partnerships to be developed and maintained over time (as opposed to compartmentalised and short-term funding), and empowering teachers and schools with the tools to identify students at risk and link them into relevant services and supports. This could include funding community sector programs that work alongside intentional teaching in schools, as well as early intervention to support family involvement in education. By working together in a collaborative and cohesive way, already-established relationships can be used to support students when they need it to remain engaged in school and succeed in education.

Specific consideration should be given to funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to deliver programs in communities that are targeted towards supporting families with pre- and school-aged children to achieve educational outcomes.<sup>12</sup> Efforts to lift numeracy and literacy outcomes among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students also need to be aligned to and consistent with relevant Closing the Gap targets.

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<sup>9</sup> ACECQA, [Quality Area 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities](#), ACECQA, accessed 20 February 2024.

<sup>10</sup> I Teo, P Mitchell, F van der Kleij, & A Dabrowski, [Schools as Community Hubs. Literature Review](#). Australian Council for Educational Research, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> R Black, [Beyond the classroom: Building new school networks](#), ACER Press, 2008. p. 6

<sup>12</sup> ACARA, [NAPLAN Commentary 2023](#), ACARA, 23 August 2023, accessed 20 February 2024.

## Early intervention

Research shows the earlier children's developmental and learning needs are addressed, the better their chances are for healthier development and successful learning outcomes, with accruing positive lifelong affects for both the individual and society.<sup>13</sup> Children that do not have their basic learning, health and wellbeing needs met early on tend to have significant trouble catching up with peers, and this in turn contributes to poorer literacy and numeracy outcomes. Over the life-course, children who experience multiple forms of inequity, such as poverty and disability, are far more likely to experience worsening and compounding of poor educational outcomes. As identified in data collected by the Southside Initiative, early intervention can prevent these compounding impacts of multiple forms on inequity<sup>14</sup>.

In the ACT, too many students are already significantly behind when they start their schooling. Over the last four Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) censuses, the ACT has seen an increase in the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable on all but one of the AEDC domains and the two summary domains, vulnerable on one or more domains and vulnerable on two or more domains.<sup>15</sup> In response to this, consultations in the ACT have revealed that organisations and sectors continue to operate in isolation and, as a result, it has been reported that families are struggling to access cohesive and holistic pathways of care for their children.<sup>16</sup> Examining the variation in early childhood vulnerability across suburbs making up the ACT's nine districts reveals greater developmental vulnerability is experienced in clusters of suburbs. According to the 2018 AEDC, 26.7% of 5-year-old children in the ACT were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains, with the figure being higher in certain districts, such as Belconnen and Tuggeranong.

ACTCOSS acknowledges efforts by the ACT Government to strengthen access to quality early education and care through initiatives such as free preschool for three-year-olds. We suggest that initiatives such as this be further strengthened to support the most vulnerable and at-risk children and families, and are delivered alongside well-resourced community programs to support holistic early childhood development. In addition, the Education Directorate should evaluate the merits of expanding the free three-year-old preschool program.

In addition to strengthening access to quality and holistic early education and care, improving numeracy and literacy outcomes requires investment in more systemic measures to support the identification of school-aged students who are struggling or at risk, and providing evidence-based early interventions. The ACT does not currently have a standardised and evidence-based approach to screening students for their early reading or

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<sup>13</sup> P Sahlberg, S Goldfeld, J Quach, C Senior, C Sinclair, [Reinventing Australian Schools for the better wellbeing, health and learning of every child: A discussion paper for the public on five key principles to improve the wellbeing, health and learning outcomes of every child in every community](#), Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Healthy Schools Network ACT, [Southside Initiative Focus 2024, Healthy Schools Network ACT, 2024, accessed 19 February 2024](#).

<sup>15</sup> Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), [Australian Early Development Census ACT key findings 2021](#).

<sup>16</sup> V Saunders, M Beck, J McKechnie, M Lincoln, C Phillips, J Herbert, R Davey R, A Good start in life: Effectiveness of integrated multicomponent multisector support on early child development-Study protocol, [PLoS One](#). 2022 Aug 3;17(8):e0267666.

numeracy skills in their foundation years (from Kindergarten to Year 2). Additional support is also needed for teachers and schools to better identify and support students who may be experiencing challenges or vulnerabilities in other aspects of their lives.

### **Relationship between educational inequities and school-based management and autonomy**

The ACT's public education system has undergone significant reform over the past few decades, with a notable emphasis on decentralisation through school-based management and increased autonomy. Such reforms have given school principals greater control over decision-making around the recruitment of staff, budgetary decisions about centrally-provided funding, as well as maintenance and planning.

ACTCOSS is concerned that the shift to school-based management and autonomy may have contributed to educational disparities, including in literacy and numeracy. A recent report into the ACT school system from Equity Economics identified a range of adverse consequences from this approach, including deepening disparities in educational outcomes among those from disadvantaged backgrounds, inconsistent teaching standards and practices, the proliferation of administrative work at the school level, and a patchy approach to the collection and use of data. As noted in a 2017 report from the ACT Auditor:

Under the ACT model of public education considerable autonomy and responsibility is given to schools. This appears to have resulted in a high level of variability in the use of student performance information and management information systems and a wide range of school-based assessment tools used across ACT Public Schools; for a small jurisdiction such as the ACT this is excessive. A better balance between school autonomy and consistency across schools in how performance information is analysed and used is needed.

Experience in OECD countries indicates that delegating budgetary responsibilities to schools may create tensions between pedagogical and administrative school leadership, leading to adverse consequences for educational inequities. As concluded in a 2017 OECD report into school funding mechanisms:

School autonomy over budgetary matters can provide schools with needed flexibility to use allocated resources in line with local needs and priorities. But it also needs to be accompanied with adequate transparency, leadership capacity and support, and mechanisms to avoid widening inequities.<sup>17</sup>

While financial imperatives and meeting administrative requirements have come to assume a greater focus under school-based management, and in a context of overall funding scarcity, it appears considerations around equity and inclusion have been not been sufficiently prioritised in ACT public schools – particularly in relation to investment in targeted and more resource-intensive approaches for students experiencing vulnerabilities or from social and/or economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

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<sup>17</sup> OECD, [The Funding of School Education: Connecting Resources and Learning](#), OECD Publishing, Paris, (2017).

Noting these issues, ACTCOSS believes the current framework of school autonomy should be reconsidered and must be supported with more effective central policy making, oversight, evidence-based advice and timely support to support equity outcomes. There also needs to be greater clarity about the expectations of schools to contribute to equity goals, in exchange for their ability to operate with significant autonomy and discretion. Those expectations should then inform appropriate accountability and regulatory frameworks. Funding specifically earmarked to support students experiencing greater educational disadvantage needs to be used for that purpose.

### **Quality and use of data**

As stated previously, the ACT is a somewhat unique jurisdiction due to the relatively high average income of the population, which can conceal the impact of entrenched poverty and disadvantage. It is therefore essential to ensure approaches to improving teaching quality and literacy and numeracy outcomes are grounded in data that captures the diversity of needs and issues within and between schools, and that is tailored to the needs of the ACT community. To achieve genuine, long-term improvements, the Education Directorate must be enabled to collect, analyse, and use high-quality and relevant data sources. Some potential methods to achieve effective data collection and usage include:

- Ensuring the use of a variety of data points and sources as well as NAPLAN results, including, for example, the Australian Early Development Census to inform holistic policy decision making.<sup>18</sup>
- Committing to using carefully selected and measurable markers of inequity that reflect the demographics of the ACT community and the linkages between educational outcomes and specific social and economic factors.
- Ensuring all key terms such as “quality teaching” are well-defined and easily measured.
- Ensuring resource allocation across schools reflects effective and nuanced data collection and analysis of demographic trends and outcomes.
- In analysis of educational outcomes, such as NAPLAN results, using relevant indicators such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and level of parental educational attainment to better understand and respond to the intersecting drivers of educational inequities and outcomes.<sup>19</sup>
- Ensuring timely reporting and follow-up of data collection and analysis. In partnership with schools, the Education Directorate should ensure that policy decisions are having their intended effects on numeracy and literacy outcomes for all students, particularly those experiencing inequities.<sup>20</sup>
- Foregrounding impact assessments with commitments to improving outcomes for students experiencing both multiple forms of inequities and the lowest level of educational attainment.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Healthy Schools Network ACT, [Southside Initiative Focus 2024, Healthy Schools Network ACT, 2024.](#)

<sup>19</sup> AERO, [Learning outcomes of students with early low NAPLAN performance, AERO, August 2023, accessed 26 February 2024.](#)

<sup>20</sup> OECD, [Education Policy Outlook, OECD, 2023.](#)

<sup>21</sup> J Del Rio, H Noura, K Jones and A Sukkarieh, [Raising the grade, Equity](#) Economics, 2023.

## **Inclusive practices**

ACTCOSS supports inclusive education in the ACT and urges that changes to education policy reflect a commitment to reduce segregation for all students, and particularly for students with disabilities. The ACT Government's *Future of Education Strategy Phase Two Implementation Plan* foregrounds inclusion for students with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as priority one. As stated in the plan, students with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are currently not benefiting equitably from improvements made in the areas of inclusion, student agency and wellbeing.

While poorer literacy and numeracy outcomes are disproportionately experienced by certain groups due to social, cultural and economic factors, it is important there is a nuanced approach to defining and supporting 'equity cohorts'. Students in these designated cohorts, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students with disability, have often reported they are the subject of deficit discourse and a culture of low expectations not experienced by other students. The education system needs to provide all students with the support they require to succeed, in ways that are not experienced as stigmatising or perpetuating disadvantage or wider forms of societal discrimination.

To implement inclusive practices to improve learning outcomes for students with disabilities, teachers require effective and ongoing professional development. ACTCOSS member engagement has shown that families of children with disabilities are concerned with resourcing for the ACT Public Schools Inclusive Education Strategy. Efforts to raise literacy and numeracy attainment will only be successful if strategies support all students, with prioritisation given to those experiencing inequities, including students with disabilities. Universal design infrastructure, supporting teachers to have more time out of the classroom, and enabling therapeutic and allied health professionals to work within schools are all inclusive education goals that will support quality teaching and improvement in literacy and numeracy outcomes.

## **Recommendations**

1. Resource and support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to develop culturally appropriate early childhood and school-age student programs to support childhood learning and development and family involvement in education.
2. Resource and support community sector services to develop and deliver programs that support early childhood development, provide learning support and involve families in their child's education.
3. Develop and implement a system-wide strategy to support partnerships and linkages between schools and community sector services to improve the range and accessibility of extended services to students, schools and families.



4. Expand wellbeing teams in schools to identify students facing barriers (for example, homelessness, family violence, poor mental health) and support them to access specialist capability and capacity from funded community sector organisations.
5. Develop school policies and curriculums that enable more family and community engagement in schools to empower relationship building and involvement efforts to support a communal attitude towards educational attainment in literacy and numeracy.
6. Establish explicit objectives, indicators and targets for numeracy and literacy that are directed at improving school outcomes for students experiencing disadvantage.
7. Ensure that data collection methods and use of data reflect what is most relevant, based on current understandings of which key inequity factors influence literacy and numeracy outcomes.
8. Continue and further enhance measures to improve the inclusivity of ACT Public Schools for students with disabilities, recognising that addressing this inequity is a path to more inclusive and flexible learning environments that better support all children.

Yours sincerely

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