Joint submission from School Library Associations to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System
Executive summary

The Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System is a once in a generation opportunity to ensure that the frameworks and structures are in place to ensure that all Australian students, regardless of location or background, receive a world-class education that supports their educational achievement and wellbeing.

Australian and international evidence shows that access to a school library run by qualified staff improves student outcomes,[i] and plays an important role in student wellbeing.[ii] School libraries are essential supports for teachers, and having no, or an under-resourced school library impedes whole of school literacy programs, curriculum resourcing and digital literacy outcomes, as well as increasing the workload of teachers. The presence or absence of qualified library staff will impact on the delivery and success of initiatives under the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) designed to boost student outcomes. Despite this importance, there is currently no requirement for states and territories to gather and report information about school libraries or any national standards for school library provision.

To support students and teachers we recommend:

1. A target that every Australian school student has access to a well-resourced school library run by qualified staff.
2. Each state and territory collect and report annual data as to:
    a. Which schools have school libraries
    b. The staffing levels and qualifications of their school library staff
    c. The non-capital resourcing budgets for school libraries.
3. That national collaboration and bilateral agreements to support innovative programs through school libraries are supported.

About this submission

This joint submission is made by:

- Australian Library and Information Association
- School Library Association of New South Wales
- School Library Association of South Australia
- School Library Association of Victoria
- Students Need School Libraries Campaign

Improving student outcomes

Student access to a school library managed by qualified staff improves student outcomes. There is a strong body of national[iii] and international[iv] research into the positive impacts, or conversely the negative impact that a lack of access to a strong school library has on students. In Australia, the Australian Council for Educational Research's (ACER) 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, taking into account the effect of socio-economic status, when compared to schools where no qualified person managed the library.[v] The impact was

most significant at Year 9 level, a stage at which the gap between higher and lower performing students measured through NAPLAN is at its largest.

The Census also showed the significant equity divide in student access to school libraries, with students in larger metropolitan schools more likely to have access to a well-resourced library with qualified staff. The uneven spread of qualified school library staff is likely exacerbating equity issues. There is an urgent need for robust data collection to identify equity gaps, detailed further below at "Data collection".

AI literacy

In order to use generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools effectively, safely and ethically, students and staff need to be AI literate.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) suggests that AI literacy can be conceptualised as entailing the following elements:

- A basic understanding of how AI and machine learning (ML) work, their underlying logic and their limitations;
- Understanding the potential societal impacts of AI, especially in the area of human rights;
- Personal data management skills; and
- Media and information literacy.[vi]

Library staff have been major drivers of media and information literacy for students, helping students develop the skills to find, evaluate, store and manage information, to reuse information to create new knowledge or solve problems, and to understand how information exists within social, ethical, cultural and legal contexts. This includes fostering the skills to refine search queries to find the right answer and building conceptual frameworks that are directly adaptable to the fashionable skill of "prompt engineering", that is, understanding the right prompt to get optimal results from generative AI tools.[vii] Ethical approaches to information, from copyright and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) through to bias, transparency and privacy are all core values and skills for teacher librarians that are relevant to students' use of generative AI.

Similarly, teacher librarians in schools have responsibility for whole school information literacy programs with a focus on the Australian Curriculum 'General Capabilities' of critical and creative thinking, digital literacy, ethical understanding, intercultural understanding, literacy, numeracy, and personal and social capability. This includes the elements of digital literacy, practising digital safety and wellbeing, investigating, managing and operating, creating and exchanging, and sub-elements including 'manage digital privacy and identity', 'locate information', 'acquire and collate data', 'respect intellectual property' and 'create, communicate and collaborate', all capabilities key to a future working effectively with artificial intelligence. To prepare students to meet their current and future potential, these capabilities need to be implemented with an artificial intelligence lens.[viii]

The decline, particularly prevalent in public schools in some states and territories, of qualified school library staff, especially teacher librarians, places students in these schools at risk of significant disadvantage in obtaining the necessary information, media and AI literacy skills. This could accelerate a growing divide between schools that are well-resourced with libraries that support students in knowing how to use generative AI tools, including limitations, referencing and academic integrity, copyright and ICIP, and those where students have less support.[ix]

Improving student mental health and wellbeing

School libraries play a critical role in student wellbeing, equity, diversity and inclusion.[x] Physical school libraries provide a place to relax, recharge, be social or also be quiet, increasingly rare in our busy world. School libraries are also a safe and welcoming place, a role that is important for many students, including those who don't feel like they belong and students who may not feel safe on the playground.[xi] Libraries are perceived as places of sanctuary and belonging by students.[xii] The role that both teaching and non-teaching staff in school libraries play in supporting student mental health and wellbeing cannot be underestimated, especially as it is difficult to numerically quantify.

As the discussion paper notes, literacy and wellbeing are linked. The role of school libraries in fostering a joy of reading, not necessarily tied to class progress, supports lifelong literacy and wellbeing. Well-resourced school libraries with diverse collections ensure that students hear a range of voices. Representation in school library collections can be particularly important for students with disability or those from marginalised communities, such as First Nations, LGBTQIA+ and CALD communities.

Please see Appendix 1 for further examples of the ways in which school libraries support student wellbeing.

Attracting and retaining teachers

The reduction in teacher librarians and other qualified school library staff has added to the workload of other teachers. Teachers in schools without teacher librarians take on additional tasks such as resourcing the curriculum, managing the school's reading and literacy programs, research, study skills, inquiry learning, teaching academic integrity, copyright and ethical use of information and developing referencing skills.[xiii] These tasks fall on the shoulders of already overburdened teachers, exacerbating issues of work overload and burnout.

Teacher librarians provide critical support with digital technologies and as information professionals can lead the use of quality 'edtech', supporting teachers to improve outcomes for their students, especially those requiring access to personalised learning. Furthermore, teacher librarians are experienced educators, often coming to the specialisation mid-way through their careers, and, in collaboration with teaching staff, also provide valuable mentoring and personalised professional learning when collaboratively planning and team teaching.[xiv]

Meanwhile the parlous state of positions for teacher librarians in some states means that there are not enough graduates coming through each year to keep at replacement levels.

Data collection

Despite the known impact of school libraries, there is currently no systematic data collection about the provision, resourcing or staffing of school libraries. There is also no guidance to state and territory governments as to resourcing of school libraries, or any commitment to ensure student access to school libraries is not a privilege reserved for children attending wealthy independent or metropolitan schools.

Where data is collected at jurisdictional level, the scope and parameters are not adequately defined to produce robust and useable data sets. As an example, one jurisdiction has a definition of a library that includes multi-media rooms, with no additional requirements as to resources or staffing. Standards around data collection that would allow cross-comparison between jurisdictions, allow identification of areas of concern and assist in workforce planning.

The lack of data on school libraries means that an essential variable is not being accounted for when measurements and assessments of literacy and other programs are being made, undermining the utility of other data collection activities.

Recommendations

To support students and teachers we recommend:

1. A target that every Australian school student has access to a well-resourced school library run by qualified staff.
2. Each state and territory collect and report annual data as to:
    a. Which schools have school libraries
    b. The staffing levels and qualifications of their school library staff
    c. The non-capital resourcing budgets for school libraries.
3. That national collaboration and bilateral agreements to support innovative programs through school libraries are supported.

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