

June 2021

Bringing out the best in every child

An Education strategy
for the ACT

Canberra
Liberals



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“State and Territory results show that after taking account of intake and context differences, ACT government schools on average achieve negative results on every measure.”

*Lamb, in ACT Auditor-General's Report
Performance Information in ACT Public Schools, 2017:5*

At a primary school level “by Year 5 students in the ACT are almost 6 months behind students in comparable schools.”

*Victoria University, Melbourne
Government School Performance in the ACT, 2017:4*

At the high school level “in writing and numeracy, in Years 7 and 9, almost all mean results from government high schools [tested] were below the equivalent mean results from statistically similar schools.”

*Australian National University
Academic underperformance in ACT schools; 2018:13*

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



About Jeremy Hanson

Jeremy Hanson, CSC, MLA

Jeremy Hanson is the ACT Shadow Minister for Education and Higher Education and Shadow Minister for Early Childhood Education. He is also Shadow Minister for Police and Veterans' Affairs. He has been a member of the ACT Assembly since 2008 and has previously held positions including Leader of the Opposition, Shadow Minister for Health and Shadow Attorney General. Jeremy is the Opposition Whip and has extensive experience on Assembly committees including the Assembly's Standing Committee on Education and Youth Affairs, Economic Development and Tourism and Justice and Community Safety.

Prior to being elected to the Assembly, Jeremy served as an Army officer for 22 years, including operational service in East Timor and Iraq. He was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross for his service in 2006. He is a graduate of the Royal Military College and Australian Command and Staff Course and has a Bachelor's degree from the University of New England and a Master's degree from the University of Canberra.



About Karen Macpherson

Dr Karen Macpherson, BEd (USyd), PhD (UCan)

An undergraduate degree in Primary School teaching from the University of Sydney led Dr Karen Macpherson some years later to a varied career at the University of Canberra, where she was a Communication academic and Education researcher specialising in the pedagogy of teaching; critical thinking; and assessment for more than 20 years.

Dr Macpherson has served on ACT High School and College Boards, and on Advisory Panels for the ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies. She has conducted research in ACT government and non-government schools for the Australian Computer Society on students digital media consumption; and understanding of careers in ICT.

Her PhD thesis in Education demonstrated the importance of concept-based teaching to the development of critical thinking and information literacy skills in online environments. Her post-doctoral research extended these educational principles to examining analytic thinking in ANU medical students, and to the effect of cognitive bias on clinical decision-making processes in emergency medicine interns and consultants at Royal North Shore Hospital.

Dr Macpherson has published a range of papers in international academic journals ranked in the top 5% of quality worldwide. She was an Expert Reader for the Australian Research Council for ten years. In recognition of her contributions to the scholarship of teaching, she was made a Fellow of the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Scholarship at the University of Canberra.

Dr Macpherson is now a consultant writer, analyst and researcher in Education. She has no party-political affiliations. Her undertaking of the preparation of this policy paper reflects her abiding passion and interest in ensuring that education provides the best possible learning outcomes for every student.

FOREWORD

The education of school aged children to prepare them for their lives ahead is in my view the most important area of government policy and service delivery that the ACT government has responsibility for. We have a workforce of dedicated teachers who are passionate about students' learning and wellbeing. We need to support them by improving the system in which they work.

The government education system is complex including varied levels of parental interaction and choice, politically charged funding debates, philosophical arguments about curriculum and pedagogy, significant infrastructure investment decisions and equity challenges.

At its core however is the very simple question of whether the ACT system is delivering the best education for every child, regardless of their background or ability?

My conclusion after collaborating with Dr Karen Macpherson for the development of this paper is that no, it isn't.

This paper lays out the issues that are holding our system back from achieving its full potential, and outlines a way ahead to make the improvements that are needed across the key areas of academic standards; equity; bullying and violence; school funding and governance; and overcrowded schools and ageing infrastructure.

An independent systemic review of the ACT Education system is needed to address these issues and a terms of reference for such a review is provided as part of this paper.

I invite feedback and consultation of the issues raised in this paper and look forward to hearing from you in person or by email.

Jeremy Hanson

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Canberra
Liberals

Our Vision






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



REPORT ON A PAGE

The ACT Education System has been underperforming in literacy and numeracy outcomes relative to other Australian regions of similar socio-economic advantage for at least 10 years.

The ACT Liberals propose a **FIVE POINT STRATEGY** to achieve better education outcomes for every child.

		WHAT	HOW
1		Improving Falling Academic Standards	Exceptional Teaching + Focused Curriculum. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Equipping teachers with the tools and support they need to provide strong learning gain for every student, in every year of schooling.• Streamlining curriculum to focus on Literacy and Numeracy foundations.
2		Genuine Equity for Every Student	Creating Real Opportunity. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Making equity of access to education a reality for every student, regardless of their background or ability.• Creating environments that bring out the best in every child.
3		Reducing Bullying and Violence	Stronger Leadership + Positive School Cultures. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Working with communities and families to make our schools safer.• Creating positive cultures in every school.
4		More Support for Schools through Better Funding and Governance	More Effective Funding + Better Governance. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensuring funds are spent on what works.• Re-balancing governance for a stronger Government school system.• Building policy and programs based on evidence and review.
5		Fixing Overcrowded Schools + Ageing Infrastructure	Realistic Planning + Better Management. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improving school capacity planning to meet demand proactively.• Better management of school infrastructure.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ACT has been underperforming in Literacy and Numeracy outcomes for at least ten years. No fewer than five independent research reports on ACT long-term results in NAPLAN have reached the conclusion that when compared with other States and Territories across Australia:

“after taking account of intake and context differences, ACT government schools on average achieve negative results on every measure.”¹

Depending on the specific focus of these reports, they calculate that between two and 16 months of learning gain is lost. Further, international assessments reveal that the ACT’s underperformance extends to Science.

The big question is of course, why? Despite the ACT having the highest teacher salaries, the smallest class sizes, and the second highest education funding per student in Australia, evidence from numerous sources suggests that over time, a cluster of important factors under the control of the ACT government has combined to create a stagnating education system that is overdue for reform.

That stagnation is neither inevitable nor irreversible. A range of policy “levers” available to government can be utilised to improve educational outcomes so that every child in the ACT has the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

¹ Lamb, S. 2017: *Government School Performance in the ACT Analysis Paper* prepared for the ACT Education Directorate, Victoria University, Melbourne; p 4

² *Strategic and Functional Review of the ACT Public Sector and Services*, 2006: p 180

³ The Hon Alan Tudge, Federal Minister for Education, 27 April 2021 “Lifting Australia’s school performance: Lessons from abroad” *The Age Schools Summit*

PART A: The ACT Education System

1. // The Issue: An Underperforming System

ACT Labor came to power in 2001. In their 20 years in office, Labor’s public stance has always been that the ACT is one of the highest performing education systems in Australia. But from as early as 2005-6, the ACT government was aware that this was not the case.² Analysis of publicly available national and international standardised assessments for the last ten years has enabled the real outcomes in the ACT government school system to emerge.

Headline claims that the ACT is one of the top performing Australian jurisdictions in Education mask the true situation: long term underperformance and downward trends in Literacy and Numeracy outcomes at both primary and secondary levels, where ACT students can be up to six months or more behind achievement levels reached in other regions of similar socio-economic advantage.

ACT’s performance is not simply a reflection of the Australia-wide trend of stagnation in Literacy and Numeracy outcomes evidenced by the OECD international assessment PISA. That series of assessments reveals that an Australian 15-year-old today “is a full year of learning behind where the average 15-year-old was in 2000. In mathematics, they are a full 14 months behind.”³

In the ACT, there are other factors at play.

2. // Evidence of Underperformance

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 first is the most recently reported Education performance indicators, available in the ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-2020. Out of seven key performance indicators, only one was met.

The second is 13 years of national standardised Literacy and Numeracy assessment (NAPLAN). Compared to other regions of similar socio-economic advantage, the ACT has been underperforming on these assessments since at least 2012 and has a downward trajectory.

The third is years of international standardised assessment of Maths, Science and Reading (PISA); and of Maths and Science (TIMSS). On the most recent PISA assessment, the ACT is below the average for comparably high Australian socio-economic advantage quartile groups on every indicator: Literacy, Maths, and Science. On TIMSS in 2019, ACT mean Maths and Science scores were well below the means used for assessing socio-economic advantage in both Year 4, and Year 8.

Although ACT, national and international assessments all point to a long-term underperformance in the ACT on Literacy, Numeracy, and Science, latest results for other comparable countries such as the USA and the UK on PISA, show improvement; indicating that the decline is neither inevitable nor irreversible.

3. // What are the Causes?

Two points need to be made at the outset. Firstly, that whilst Literacy and Numeracy are not the only desirable outcomes of schooling, they are the most important ones for lifelong learning, jobs, and participation in society. Secondly, the long-term underperformance in Literacy, Numeracy and Science outcomes in the ACT is in no way a criticism of teachers. On the contrary, teachers in the ACT are as dedicated and hardworking as they are anywhere else in Australia, and the causal factors are complex, and lie elsewhere - in the system.

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.

Regarding the 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 fewer 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, participation, and employment.

PART B: ACT Liberals Strategy for Change

4. // Our Vision: To Bring out the Best in Every Child, regardless of their Background or Ability.

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. The Liberal Strategy is summarized in the Table shown right.

ACT Liberal Five Point Strategy for Change: AT A GLANCE

Bringing Out the Best in Every Child

1. Improving Falling Academic Standards <i>Exceptional Teaching + Focused Curriculum</i>	<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
2. Genuine Equity for Every Student <i>Creating Real Opportunity</i>	<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
3. Reducing Bullying and Violence <i>Stronger Leadership + Positive School Cultures</i>	<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
4. More Support for Schools though Better Funding and Governance <i>More Effective Funding + Better Governance</i>	<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
5. Fixing Overcrowded Schools + Ageing Infrastructure <i>Realistic Planning + Better Management</i>	<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

5. // The Strategy: What Works

The six most important factors that influence learning are: Teacher; Teaching; Curricula; School; Student; and Home. 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.

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.

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.⁴

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.⁵

Considerations for Teacher Quality (Sn 5.1.1) include a suite of guidelines for improving teacher university entry levels and content; workforce initiatives to attract high quality candidates; professional development; and attractive career paths.

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 (Sn 5.1.2) include a range of initiatives to ensure early learning introduction, explicit teaching of foundations, regular formative assessments to identify issues in a timely fashion; and support interventions that are proven to be effective.

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.”⁶

Considerations for Curriculum Review (Sn 5.1.3) include the importance of developing an ACT system-level approach; a review of secondary school guidelines; and a review of college subjects.

⁴ Hattie, J. *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. First published 2009

⁵ The Hon Alan Tudge MP, Minister for Education and Youth. 11 March 2021: *A world beating education*, Address delivered at Menzies Research Centre

⁶ The Hon Alan Tudge, Federal Minister for Education, 27 April 2021 “Lifting Australia’s school performance: Lessons from abroad” *The Age Schools Summit*

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.⁷

In addition to the “hidden” socio-economic disadvantage in the ACT, there are many other factors that affect engagement with education, such as disability; challenging behaviours; being from a culturally and linguistically diverse background; or being gifted or talented.

Considerations for Genuine Equity and Real Opportunity (Sn 5.2) are wide-ranging. Each group experiencing disadvantage or challenge has a unique cluster of issues that must be identified and addressed to produce better outcomes. Equity and opportunity for every individual within a framework of strong social cohesion needs to be the goal.

5.3 // Reducing Bullying and Violence: Stronger Leadership + Positive School Cultures

5.3.1 Reducing Bullying and Violence

Schools experience the same challenges as other parts of society in relation to bullying and violence. Measures to eliminate violence outside school environments may contribute to the elimination of bullying and violence within schools. This requires an ongoing public commitment to changes in attitudes and beliefs associated with violence.⁸

Considerations for Bullying and Violence (Sn 5.3.1) include system-level policies; school-level interventions; and community engagement as essential components of any concerted effort to reduce the incidence of anti-social behaviour in schools.

5.3.2 Leadership and Culture

High-quality school leadership is the practice of positively influencing individual and collective teaching expertise in a professional learning culture to secure a strong rate of progress for all learners.⁹

By their actions, school leaders set the standards, tone and expectations that together create a school's culture. High quality schools have a strong positive culture that provides a safe environment for learning and promotes excellence and achievement.

Considerations for School Leadership and Culture (Sn 5.3.2) include professional development, community engagement for safer schools; and leadership effects on school culture establishment.

5.4 // More Support for Schools though Better Funding and Governance: More Effective Funding + Better Governance

5.4.1 Governance and School Autonomy

There has been a strong political consensus that greater school autonomy and local decision making improves public education. There is little evidence for this consensus.

⁷ Hattie, J. 2015: *What Doesn't Work: The Politics of Distraction*, Pearson; p 6

⁸ 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*; Finding 1, p x

⁹ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership: *Leading for impact: Australian guidelines for school leadership development*. n.d. Available at: aitsl.edu.au

Instead, evidence indicates greater autonomy has increased inequalities across education systems.¹⁰

The existing model of school autonomy has gradually devolved more and more responsibility to individual schools. Currently instead of a strong government education system, we have a collection of schools.

Considerations for Governance and School Autonomy (Sn 5.4.1) include a review of governance and autonomy structures within the ACT education system to ensure a better balance between system-wide policy and decision making, and school autonomy, and rigorous and timely evaluation of policies and programs.

5.4.2 Funding to Where It's Needed

Taxpayers are now fully aware of the billions upon billions of dollars spent on schooling, but it is the human cost that should occupy our minds... For thousands of young people, the dismal reality is that they lack the essential knowledge and skills that enable individuals to thrive.¹²

Considerations for Funding (Sn 5.4.2) include the importance of maintaining school funding, whilst making it work more effectively through smart reform in investment.¹³ This means a thorough review of where education funding goes; and rigorous evaluation of value-for-money in programs to generate either improved learning outcomes directly; or indirectly by way of creating support to achieve those outcomes. Approaches that are widely implemented elsewhere, or popular,

should not be adopted without careful review of their evidence base and actual success in improving learning. For example, money invested in teacher quality improvement is much more effective than small changes in class size.

5.4.3 Evidence-based Decisions and Practice

Governments are responsible for making policy decisions to improve the quality of life for individuals and the population. Using a scientific approach to investigate all available evidence can lead to policy decisions that are more effective in achieving desired outcomes as decisions are based on accurate and meaningful information.¹⁴

The recognition of the importance of evidence-based decision making and practice is not new. It has been the underpinning of modern healthcare for decades.

Considerations for Evidence-Based Practice in Education (Sn 5.4.3) include initial teacher education content on critical thinking, assessment, and evaluation of evidence in the context of classroom teaching and practice; assessment data from national and international sources to be analysed by experts in a timely fashion; and information to be distributed to those who need it, when they need it, in useable form.

¹⁰ 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

¹² Mueller, F., 27 Jan 2020: 'Human cost of failing the education test', The *Canberra Times*

¹³ Fahey, G. Dec 2020: Dollars and Sense: Time for smart reform of Australian school funding, *Centre for Independent Studies*

¹⁴ ABS, 20 Oct 2010: 1500.0 - "A guide for using statistics for evidence based policy, 2010"

5.5 // Fixing Overcrowded Schools + Ageing Infrastructure: Realistic Planning + Better Management

So concerning are the issues with infrastructure management and capacity that in February 2021 the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion resolved to inquire into and report on the management of ACT school infrastructure. Issues to be investigated include but are not limited to: the management of hazardous substances and materials in schools; and the management of capacity issues in schools, including the use of temporary facilities. The Inquiry will report in December 2021.

5.5.1 Overcrowded Schools

School capacity is a major issue in the ACT. Full utilisation of school infrastructure is affected by changing demographics; new suburb development; urban infill; priority enrolment policies; and the reputation of the school. All of these factors are either directly or indirectly under the control of the government - and are foreseeable.

Considerations for School Capacity (Sn 5.5.1) include the need for more proactive approaches to capacity bottlenecks, such as longer-term more precise demographic forecasting and projections; and more timely responses to over-capacity issues including those occurring in urban infill suburbs.

5.5.2 Ageing Infrastructure

A report by the ACT Auditor-General in 2019 detailed many issues in government school asset management.¹⁵ The main issues are: that although there is a framework for management of school infrastructure assets, implementation of that framework is poor or variable at the individual school level due to “poor supporting systems and processes”; software purchased to facilitate asset management had been populated in only two of 88 (now 89) schools; and consistent budget over-runs with maintenance. There have been recent issues with a number of ageing school buildings still requiring remediation and removal of toxic substances such as lead and asbestos, at significant cost.

Considerations for Ageing Infrastructure (Sn 5.5.2) include whether buildings that are decades old are still fit-for-purpose in a modern educational setting; possible better outcomes through system-level management of school infrastructure; the need to eliminate risk from toxic substances; and the retiring of demountable buildings.

¹⁵ ACT Auditor-General Report No 11 of 2019: Maintenance of ACT Government School Infrastructure

6. // Conclusions

Every Australian State and Territory has been part of the general slide in literacy, numeracy and science outcomes that has become a feature of national and international assessments for a decade. The ACT has its own particular difficulties arising out of systemic stagnation, and far from being a star performer, is consistently below other regions of similar socio-economic advantage in outcomes.

These downward trends are not inevitable, and several international examples of dramatic improvement in educational outcomes demonstrate that improvement is achievable.

There are two major reasons why improvement in learning outcomes is so important, if indeed such an aim needs any explanation: firstly, in the national interest, we need a future workforce that can rise to the challenges of a technology-driven world.

But secondly, as any parent will tell you, “I just want my child to be happy.” The most potent way we can support children and young people to achieve this universal goal is to provide a challenging, supportive, and effective education system that brings out the best in every child.

A comprehensive independent review of the ACT Education system is needed. Terms of Reference for an independent review into the ACT Education system form Appendix A.

¹⁶ The ACT has the highest percentage of enrolments in non-government schools in Australia. ABS, Feb 2021: *Schools*. Available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>

¹⁷ ACT Education Directorate, Feb 2020: *Census of ACT Schools*; p 2

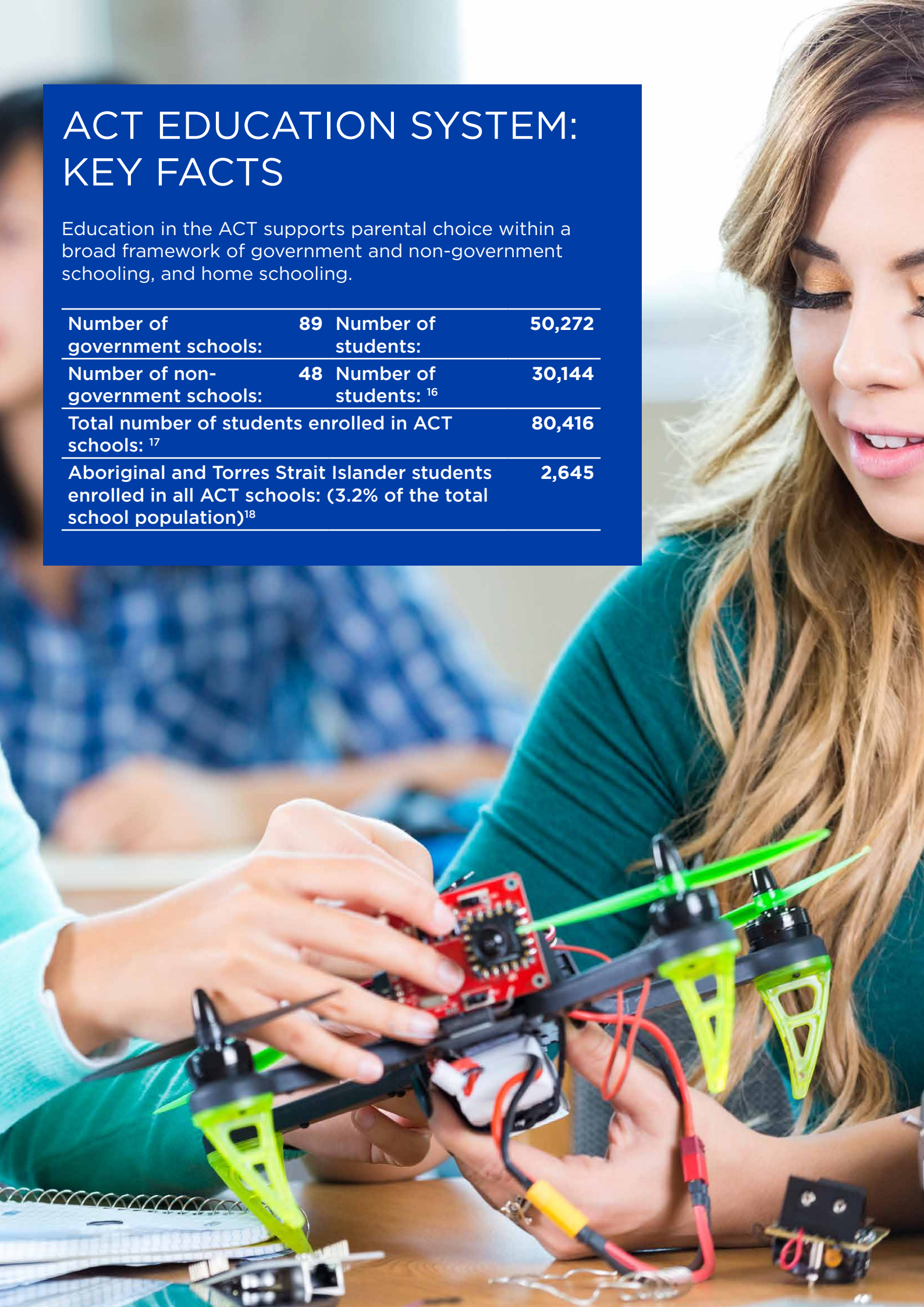
¹⁸ ABS, Feb 2021: *Schools*. Available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>



ACT EDUCATION SYSTEM: KEY FACTS

Education in the ACT supports parental choice within a broad framework of government and non-government schooling, and home schooling.

Number of government schools:	89	Number of students:	50,272
Number of non-government schools:	48	Number of students: ¹⁶	30,144
Total number of students enrolled in ACT schools: ¹⁷			80,416
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in all ACT schools: (3.2% of the total school population) ¹⁸			2,645



INTRODUCTION

Declining academic performance is jeopardising the attainment of Australia's aspiration for excellence and equity in school education. Since 2000, Australian student outcomes have declined in key areas such as reading, science and mathematics.¹⁹

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) sets out two clear goals for Australia:²⁰ Firstly, that the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity; and secondly, that all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community.

We know what we are aiming for. But learning outcomes across Australia are falling short of what is needed, and they are declining. Together with every other State and Territory in Australia, the ACT has been experiencing this decline. International assessments reveal that an Australian 15-year-old today “is a full year of learning behind where the average 15-year-old was in 2000. In mathematics, they are a full 14 months behind.”²¹

However, the ACT Education system has an additional problem. For the past 10 years, Literacy and Numeracy outcomes for ACT schools have been at or near the lowest achieved, compared to other regions of similar socio-economic advantage across Australia.

No fewer than five independent reports examining ACT Literacy and Numeracy outcomes have concluded: “After taking account of intake and context differences, ACT government schools on average achieve negative results on every measure.”²² Depending on the specific focus of these reports, they calculate that between two and 16 months²³ of learning gain is lost.

This concerning situation has arisen, and is ongoing, in the jurisdiction which enjoys the highest relative socio-economic advantage in Australia; the highest teacher salaries; the second highest expenditure per student in Australia;²⁴ and the smallest class sizes.

The big question is of course, why? Combined evidence from numerous sources suggests a picture of a system that is overdue for reform.

¹⁹ 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 viii

²⁰ *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia 2020*, Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)

²¹ The Hon Alan Tudge, Federal Minister for Education, 27 April 2021 “Lifting Australia’s school performance: Lessons from abroad” *The Age Schools Summit*

²² Lamb, S . 2017: *Government School Performance in the ACT* Analysis Paper prepared for the ACT Education Directorate, Victoria University, Melbourne; p 4

²³ Macintosh, A. and Wilkinson, D. 21 Aug 2018: *Academic underperformance in ACT schools: An analysis of ACT school performance in NAPLAN over the period 2012-2016*, Australian National University Law School Working Paper, p 9

²⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics

PURPOSE

The purposes of this paper are firstly in Part A, to present the evidence that points to the possible reasons for the chronic underperformance of ACT's Education system; and secondly in Part B, to outline the ACT Liberals' strategy to improve the education system so that every ACT school can work toward bringing out the best in every child.

SCOPE

The ACT Education system is administered by the ACT Education Directorate. The Directorate implements government policy, and is responsible for the government school system from pre-school, through primary school, high school; specialist schools and colleges. Two government sector bodies report to the Directorate. The first is the ACT Teacher Quality Institute, which is responsible for teacher registration and quality; and ACT university teaching degree accreditation.

The second is the ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies, which accredits ACT college courses, moderates, issues Senior Secondary Certificates and tertiary entrance statements, and provides vocational education and training (VET) pathways to industry-specific training in years 11 and 12. The Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) is a vocational education provider not under the administration of the Directorate.

The Directorate is also responsible for registration of non-government schools, home education and early childhood learning centres.

For focus and clarity, the scope of this paper is the government school system in the ACT from Kindergarten to Year 12.

METHOD

Using relevant evidence from multiple sources, the performance of the ACT Education system is evaluated in Part A of this paper using the structure outlined in Figure 1 below. This figure shows key features of an effective education system.

Any modern education system exists in an environment where change is the only permanent dynamic; and where technology has an increasing pervasiveness. At the highest system level, government settings influence coal-face school practices, that in turn produce outcomes: student learning and life skills.

Stakeholders are those who are affected by system outcomes; and they should form part of an ongoing consultation and continuous improvement process. For an education system, there is no stakeholder group; no aspect of society, unaffected by its outcomes.

In an effective education system, government settings and school practices rest on a strong foundation of evidence and consultation to ensure continuous improvement in student outcomes.

Environment: Changing work and jobs; technology; need for flexibility

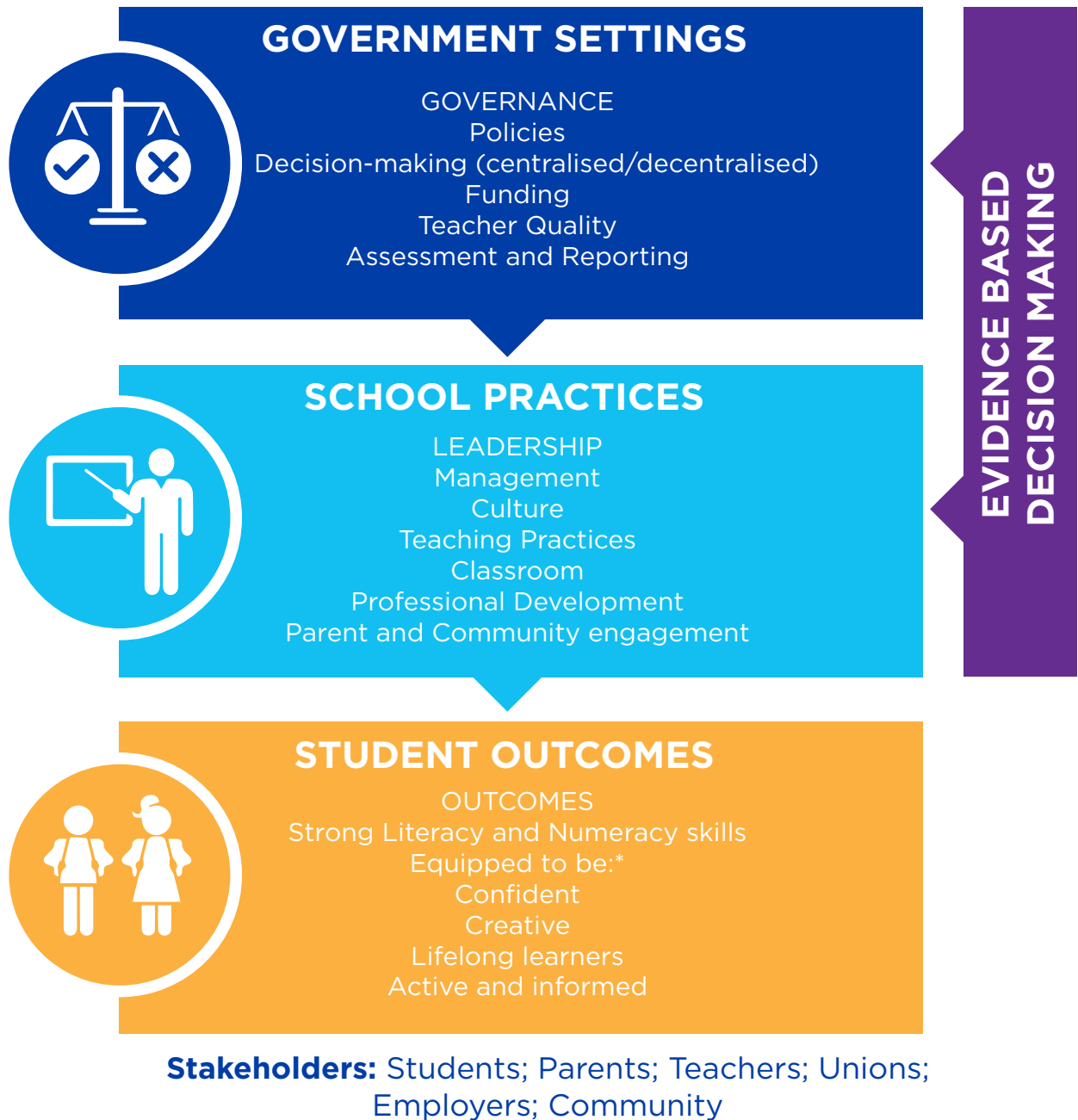


Figure 1: Characteristics of an Effective Education System

**The Alice Springs Education Declaration, Goal 2*

PART A: THE ACT EDUCATION SYSTEM

1. // The Issue: An Underperforming System

The ACT government education system comprises preschool from the age of 3-4 years; primary school years K-6; high school years 7-10; and college - years 11-12. The ACT system has two features that distinguish it from other Australian States and Territories: the separation of secondary education into high school and college instigated in the mid-1970s; and the School Autonomy Model, under which school principals exercise considerable independent authority to make local-level decisions, with the rationale that this will make the school more responsive to the intake area's needs.

In recent years the ACT government has followed the trend toward "Super Schools": the co-locating of pre-schools with primary schools; primary schools with high schools, in order to generate economies of scale, and theoretically to enable more streamlined transitions for students between school levels.

Controversially, in its newer schools, it has also embraced student-directed inquiry-based learning in multi-age/ multi-level, open classrooms for children from Kindergarten, under Labor's flagship 2018 *Future of Education Strategy*: the "roadmap" for Education over the next ten years.

In their 20 years in office, ACT Labor's public stance has always been that the ACT is one of the highest performing education systems in Australia. But from as early as 2005-6, the ACT government was aware that this was

not the case.²⁵ Analysis of publicly available national and international standardised assessments for the last ten years has enabled the real outcomes in the ACT government school system to emerge.

Two points need to be made at the outset. Firstly, that whilst of course Literacy and Numeracy are not the only desirable outcomes of schooling, they are the most important ones. Whilst we do not need every student to become a scientist, almost any job in our society today requires sound Literacy and Numeracy skills. Without them, any student will be unable to thrive in a future technology-driven world.

Secondly, it must be emphasised that the long-term underperformance in Literacy and Numeracy outcomes in the ACT is in no way a criticism of teachers. On the contrary, teachers in the ACT are as dedicated and hardworking as they are anywhere else in Australia. Rather the causal factors are complex, and lie elsewhere - in the system. As one of the world's most highly-regarded researchers into the practices that impact learning outcomes, Prof John Hattie, has observed:

I have met with many political leaders and department officials and continue to be impressed with their commitment to improving ... outcomes for students. But they struggle to have the hard ... discussions about the variability in the effectiveness of what happens at the classroom level and instead focus on policies which are politically attractive but which have been shown to have little effect on improving student learning.²⁶

²⁵ *Strategic and Functional Review of the ACT Public Sector and Services*, 2006: p 180

²⁶ Hattie, J. (2015) *The Politics of Distraction*, Pearson; p 1

This statement could have been made with the ACT Education system in mind. Politicians, administrators and teachers want good outcomes for students. But the fact remains that ACT results are consistently below those achieved in other regions of similar socio-economic advantage.

All ACT government schools are subject to a strategic external review every five years. The recent external review of the new Margaret Hendry School: the *National School Improvement Tool Review Report*²⁷ (the “Review”), illustrates clearly how following “politically attractive” classroom practices can result in very poor learning and behaviour outcomes for students, even when staff are strongly committed.

NAPLAN results for Margaret Hendry School in 2019 showed that Year 3 students were “well below” those of students with a similar background in all assessment areas: Reading, Writing, Spelling, Grammar and Numeracy.²⁸ There is a wide range of ethnicities represented at the school, with 52% of its students speaking a language other than English at home.²⁹

The findings of the external Review of Margaret Hendry Schools are summarised in the Box shown on the next page.

²⁷ ACT Education Directorate, March 2021: *National School Improvement Tool Review Report: Margaret Hendry School*

²⁸ Margaret Hendry School NAPLAN: <https://www.myschool.edu.au/school/52685/naplan/results>

²⁹ Margaret Hendry School Profile: <https://www.myschool.edu.au/school/52685>

³⁰ Parent comment, in Lansdown, S., 22 May 2021: “Bullying and suspension ‘disaster’ at ACT school”, *The Canberra Times*. pp4-5

³¹ Parent comment, in Lansdown, S., 22 May 2021: “Bullying and suspension ‘disaster’ at ACT school”, *The Canberra Times*. pp4-5

³² Lansdown, S. 29 May 2021: ‘Minister defends ACT school of future’, *The Canberra Times*; p 3

“That this could possibly be the future for ACT schools is frightening.”³⁰

Margaret Hendry School opened in early 2019, the first under Labor’s *Future of Education Strategy*. The school’s classroom model is designed to implement that “innovative” policy, and is built on student-centred learning in open classrooms from Kindergarten; working in multi-aged/ multi-level student groups; and guided by “learning coaches” (teachers). Far from being an ideal environment in which children thrive and “take control of their own learning”, the school struggles with poor academic outcomes, a culture in which bullying is facilitated in multi-aged classroom cohorts, and inexperienced teaching staff.

The *National School Improvement Tool Review Report* released in March 2021 has revealed a school in which, with regard to learning outcomes, “students were mostly unaware of their goals and were unsure of next steps for learning” (p 11); and learning coaches reported “the need for more structured intervention approaches in Literacy” (p 8).

Further, parents “identified a need for increased focus on improved academic rigour and opportunities to cater for more able learners”(p 6). One parent has commented that “she was told her child was performing well academically for two years, only to receive a report this year that the year 6 student was reading at the level of an eight-year-old.”³¹

Some students reported that they were made to feel “unsafe by the behaviour of other students and this often disrupted their learning when they could be working and thinking harder” (p 6).

With regard to teaching practices and experience, “a high number of early career educators, and teachers new to the school present challenges in maintaining the cohesion of pedagogy and expected practice” (p 7). As for systematic curriculum delivery: “the progression of learning from year to year is not consistently evident” (p 10).

Recommendations by the Review Committee included requirements for the school to meet fundamental levels of competence: the need to “establish and maintain student learning and wellbeing in an environment that is safe, and that promotes intellectual rigour” (p 15); and to ensure that every teacher can use “effective evidence-based teaching methods, including explicit instruction and feedback to improve learning outcomes” (p 15).

Independent experts in Education not connected with the Review have also commented on their concerns with aspects of the school’s pedagogical approaches. For example, Prof Lorraine Hammond of Edith Cowan University observed:

Inquiry-based teaching ... had a place in schools but basic skills and knowledge was best taught directly in a traditional classroom layout... if I had a child in a school that wasn’t teaching reading directly, I’d be very concerned.”³²

A second new school using the Margaret Hendry School model opened in Denman Prospect in Term I, 2021.

2. // The Evidence

Put simply, the problem is this: when the ACT is compared with other regions of similar socio-economic advantage across Australia:

“The ACT is the worst performer. On a like-for-like basis, its students make two to three months less progress than the national average in both primary and secondary school.”³³

Other reports conclude that the underperformance represents up to 16 months of learning.³⁴ The results are most pronounced in Writing and Numeracy in secondary schools.³⁵ These deficits have also been identified in the ACT non-government sector, to a lesser degree but still statistically significant.³⁶

There are three important sources of evidence that support the claim of chronic underperformance in the ACT system. The first is the most recently reported Education performance indicators, available in the ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-2020. The second is 13 years of national standardised Literacy and Numeracy assessment (NAPLAN). The third is years of international standardised assessment of Maths, Science and Reading (PISA); and of Maths and Science (TIMSS). Results are discussed below.

2.1 // ACT Education Performance Indicators

In 2018 the ACT government launched its Future of Education Strategy, the “roadmap” for Education over the next

ten years. Its foundations are:

1. To place students at the centre of their learning.
2. To empower teachers, school leaders and other professionals to meet the learning needs of all students.
3. To build strong communities for learning.
4. To strengthen systems to focus on equity with quality.

To date, that Strategy has been unsuccessful. The ACT Education Directorate’s most recent Annual Report (2019-2020) lists three Strategic Objectives and seven related Key Performance Indicators stemming from the four foundations listed above. Of those seven strategic indicators, only one was met.³⁷

2.1.1 Strategic Objective 1- Equity

The strategic indicator for improving equity in Reading was met, but not for improving equity in Numeracy.

2.1.2 Strategic Objective 2 - Literacy and Numeracy Gains

All four Strategic Indicators were not met. As Table 1 below indicates, actual gains in Years 3-5 Reading and Numeracy were both 12% under targets. Actual gain in Years 7-9 Reading was 27% under target; and in Numeracy, 30%.

Actual gains in years 7-9 for both Literacy and Numeracy of around 30% under target, pre-COVID 19, are worrying. And the trend in all of these indicators has been downward since at least 2012.

³³ Goss, P. and Sonneman, J., 2018: *Measuring Student Progress: a state-by state report card*, Grattan Institute; p 3

³⁴ Macintosh, A. and Wilkinson, D. 21 Aug 2018: *Academic underperformance in ACT schools: An analysis of ACT school performance in NAPLAN over the period 2012-2016*, Australian National University Law School Working Paper, p 9

³⁵ Macintosh, A. and Wilkinson, D. 21 Aug 2018: *Academic underperformance in ACT schools: An analysis of ACT school performance in NAPLAN over the period 2012-2016*, Australian National University Law School Working Paper, p 22

³⁶ Macintosh, A. and Wilkinson, D. 21 Aug 2018: *Academic underperformance in ACT schools: An analysis of ACT school performance in NAPLAN over the period 2012-2016*, Australian National University Law School Working Paper, p 19

³⁷ ACT Education Directorate *Annual Report 2019-20*, p 25

Table 1: ACT Government School Literacy and Numeracy Underperformance: Target Gain vs Actual Gain 2017-2019

(compiled from ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20) ³⁸

	2017-19	2017-19			
	Target Gain	Actual Gain	Target Met	% of target	Under-performance %
Years 3-5 Reading	84	74	No	88%	12%
Years 3-5 Numeracy	90	79	No	88%	12%
Years 7-9 Reading	40	29	No	73%	27%
Years 7-9 Numeracy	47	33	No	70%	30%

Figures 2 and 3 below clearly show the trend in declining gains in both Literacy and Numeracy from 2013-15, to 2017-19 - the most recent year in which NAPLAN assessment has been conducted.

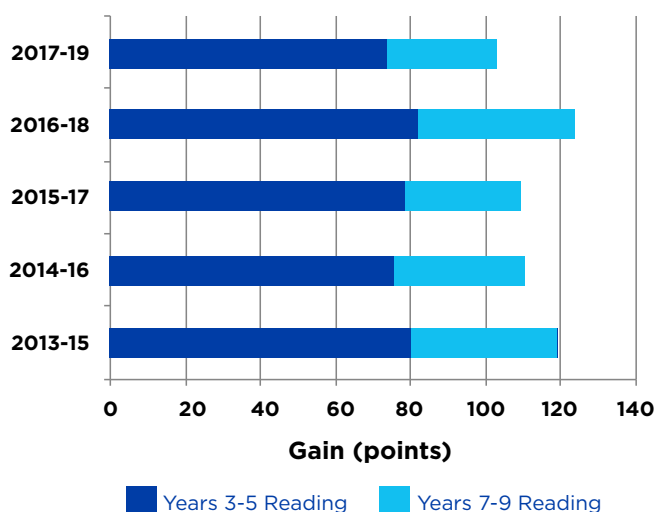


Figure 2: ACT Government School Literacy Gains (Actual) 2013-2019

(compiled from ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20; pp 25-28)³⁹

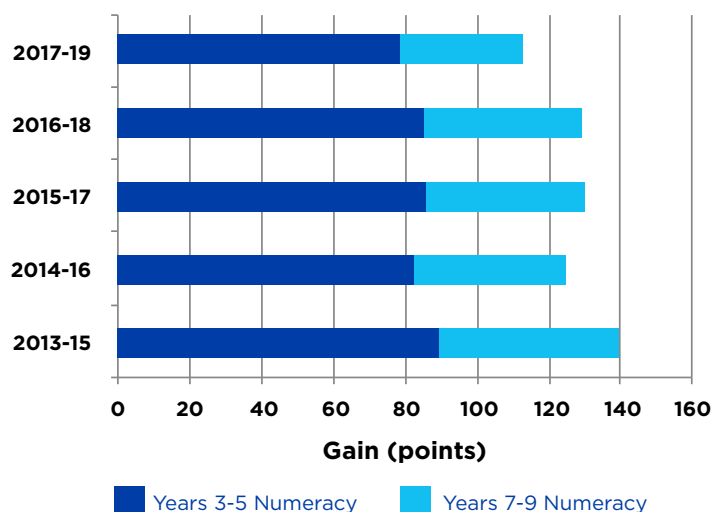


Figure 3: ACT Government School Numeracy Gains (Actual) 2013-2019

(compiled from ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20; pp 25-28)⁴⁰

³⁸ ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20, p 25

³⁹ ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20, p 25-28

⁴⁰ ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20, p 25-28

2.1.3 Strategic Objective 3 - Identification with School

None of the three targets relating to “strongly identifying” with their school: student; staff; or parent/ carer; were achieved.

Concerningly, only 60% of students “strongly identified” with their school; unchanged from 2018⁴¹. The parent “identification” with schools result was 73%, which was not only 16% under target, but was also a 15% drop from 2018. In other words, there was a large drop in the number of parents who “strongly identified” with their child’s school over that 12 month period.

Low outcome measures on a sense of belonging suggest the lack of a strong positive school culture and community. Arising out of weak school identification, lack of strong positive culture and sense of community are behaviours such as bullying and violence. A recently released report from the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs in 2019: *Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools*, describes justified concerns around the levels of bullying and violence in ACT schools.⁴²

⁴¹ ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-20, p 29

⁴² 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*

2.2 // National Program for Literacy and Numeracy Assessment: NAPLAN

The central issue with conflicting claims of performance based on NAPLAN results is that ACT government reporting on NAPLAN focuses inappropriately on comparing broad averages between States and Territories that have very different characteristics. This is the classic “apples and oranges” comparison. When ACT average performance results are compared with average performance results of other States and Territories such as NSW and Queensland, there is a superficial appearance of achievement.

But the ACT is not the same as NSW and Queensland. The ACT is a small, urbanised jurisdiction with the highest socio-economic advantage in Australia. It has a relatively highly-educated professional workforce, no issues with remoteness, a small indigenous demographic, and comparatively few issues with poverty and disadvantage.

As the ACT is uniquely advantaged, it is not directly comparable to other Australian States and Territories characterised by much more variability in socio-economic advantage, parental education and occupation, diversity, remoteness, and urbanisation. Crude comparisons of average results between jurisdictions with widely different demographics does not provide meaningful information.

As University of Canberra researchers have observed:

... relying on the ACT's comparative 'average' rank in national and international testing hides the significant inequity in the ACT's education system.⁴³

The true performance of the ACT education system can only be assessed by comparing it to regions that are similar to the ACT: urban areas in other States and Territories with high socio-economic advantage.

When these comparisons are made, the conclusions are compelling. No fewer than five independent research reports on ACT long-term results in NAPLAN have reached the conclusion that when compared with other schools situated in areas of similarly high socio-educational advantage (major cities; parental education and occupation) in every other Australian state, the ACT is a consistent under-performer:

ACT Auditor-General's Report, 4/2017:

ACT public schools are performing below similar schools in other jurisdictions despite expenditure on a per student basis for public schools being one of the highest in the country.⁴⁴

The Australia Institute, 2017:

The results of the analysis suggest there is a systemic problem with the relative performance of high SES government primary schools in the ACT in NAPLAN tests.⁴⁵

⁴³ Roberts, P. and Leonard, S., Youth Coalition of the ACT and ACTCOSS, July 2015: *Issues Paper: Educational Inequity in the ACT*; p 5

⁴⁴ ACT Auditor-General's Report, 4/2017 (May): Performance Information in ACT Public Schools, p 1

⁴⁵ Macintosh, A., Wilkinson, D. and Constable, A. July 2017: *Leading the Nation? The NAPLAN performance of the ACT's high socio-economic schools*, Policy Brief, The Australia Institute, p 7

*Victoria University, 2017, commissioned by ACT Education Directorate.*⁴⁶

Numeracy is the area of greatest concern... The Numeracy results are markedly below the rest of the country, compared to what would be expected based on the populations schools are serving in the ACT... by Year 5 students in the ACT are almost 6 months behind students in comparable schools.

ANU, 2018:

For government schools, there was systemic under-performance in primary and high schools in NAPLAN over the period 2012-2016.⁴⁷ Although underperformance in Literacy and Numeracy outcomes extends to the non-government sector, it is not as marked as in government schools.⁴⁸

Grattan Institute, 2018:

The ACT is the worst performer. On a like-for-like basis, its students make two to three months less progress than the national average in both primary and secondary school.⁴⁹

There are two important factors to be noted about these sources: firstly, that they are from a range of political backgrounds and “think tanks”; one was even commissioned by the ACT Education Directorate. Secondly, despite their varied ideological backgrounds, the central conclusions of these rigorously researched reports and papers are remarkably similar.

Depending on the specific focus of these reports, they calculate that in the ACT between two and 16 months of learning gain is lost.

The latest NAPLAN test in 2019 continued these trends. When considering socio-economic advantage as measured by both Parental Education and Parental Occupation, the ACT was behind NSW and Victoria, and below the Australian mean scale score for Numeracy in all of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.⁵⁰

In the face of such consistently damning evidence, the ACT government continues to claim that performance is among the best in Australia. At the same time it asserts variously that NAPLAN testing has only a narrow focus; is seriously flawed; stressful and unnecessary; inaccurate; or not useful. This “shooting the messenger” strategy is aimed at deflecting attention from the ongoing underperformance of the ACT. The ACT government’s antipathy is not reflected in the attitudes of school leaders, however: only 10% of principals do not agree that NAPLAN data is useful in supporting their decision making.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Lamb, S. 2017: *Government School Performance in the ACT* Analysis Paper prepared for the ACT Education Directorate, Victoria University, Melbourne; p 4

⁴⁷ Macintosh, A. and Wilkinson, D. 21 Aug 2018: *Academic underperformance in ACT schools: An analysis of ACT school performance in NAPLAN over the period 2012-2016*, Australian National University Law School Working Paper, p 22

⁴⁸ Macintosh, A. and Wilkinson, D. 21 Aug 2018: *Academic underperformance in ACT schools: An analysis of ACT school performance in NAPLAN over the period 2012-2016*, Australian National University Law School Working Paper, p 22

⁴⁹ Goss, P. and Sonnemann, J., Oct 2018: *Measuring student progress - a State by State report card*, Grattan Institute, p 3

⁵⁰ *National Assessment Program, Literacy and Numeracy: National Report for 2019*. Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority; pp 53-56; 117-120; 181-184; 245-248

⁵¹ ACT Auditor-General’s Report, 4/2017 (May): *Performance Information in ACT Public Schools*; p 88

It should be noted that ACT government criticisms of NAPLAN are not supported by rigorous review of the NAPLAN system. A comprehensive review commissioned by the ACT, QLD, NSW, and VIC governments handed down in August 2020, concluded with some changes, “that standardised assessment is important in Australian education and that it serves a variety of purposes.”⁵²

The 2017 Australia Institute study ⁵³, and the 2018 ANU report on ACT underperformance in NAPLAN both concluded that “There is a need for a government inquiry to be undertaken to determine why ACT schools ... are underperforming in NAPLAN”⁵⁴

2.3 // International Assessments

Australia’s National Assessment Program stipulates participation in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).⁵⁵

2.3.1 PISA

Administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is taken by a sample of 15-year-old students from 78 nations every three years. The assessment measures Mathematics, Science and Reading.

In the last Assessment in 2018, Australia dropped six places in Maths, from 23rd in 2015, to 29th. It dropped

one place in each of Science and Reading. In contrast, the UK and USA improved in all three of the subjects and improved their overall world placings significantly from 2015 to 2018: UK from 23rd to 13th; USA from 31st to 25th, whilst Australia remained the same (21st).⁵⁶ Figure 4 shows the long-term decline in Australian performance since 2000.

The decline is such that the average achievement of an Australian 15-year-old in 2018 is: almost one year of schooling behind in reading compared to an Australian 15-year-old in 2000; more than one full year of schooling behind in maths compared to in 2003; and almost one full year of schooling behind in science compared to in 2006.⁵⁷

⁵²McGaw, B, Loudon, W and Wyatt-Smith, C, 2020: *NAPLAN Review Final Report*. State of New South Wales, State of Queensland, State of Victoria, and Australian Capital Territory. August; p 3.

⁵³ Macintosh, A. Wilkinson, D. and Constable, A. July 2017: *Leading the Nation? The NAPLAN performance of the ACT's high socio-economic schools Australia Institute*; p 7

⁵⁴ Macintosh, A. and Wilkinson, D. 2018: *Academic underperformance in ACT schools: An analysis of ACT school performance in NAPLAN over the period 2012 to 2016*, ANU. p 23

⁵⁵ *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia 2020 (ACARA)*; p 6

⁵⁶ PISA worldwide ranking; comparison of 2015 and 2018-19 results

⁵⁷ ACER, 2019: *Australian Students' Performance*. Available at: <https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/pisa-2018-australian-students-performance>

The ACT is below the average for comparably high Australian socio-economic advantage quartile groups on every indicator: Literacy, Maths, and Science.⁵⁸ (See Figure 5). Socio-economic status is a strong predictor of performance in mathematics and science in all PISA participating countries.⁵⁹

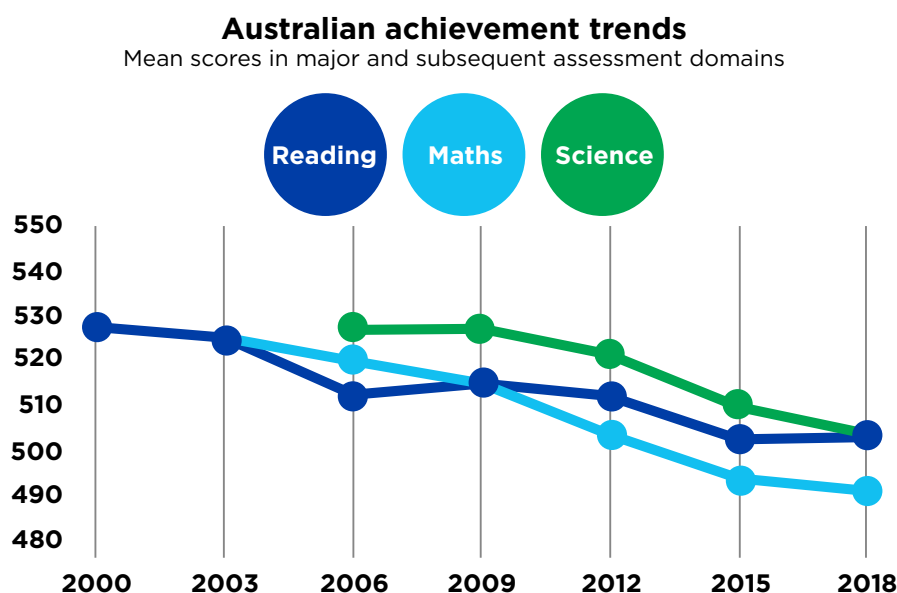
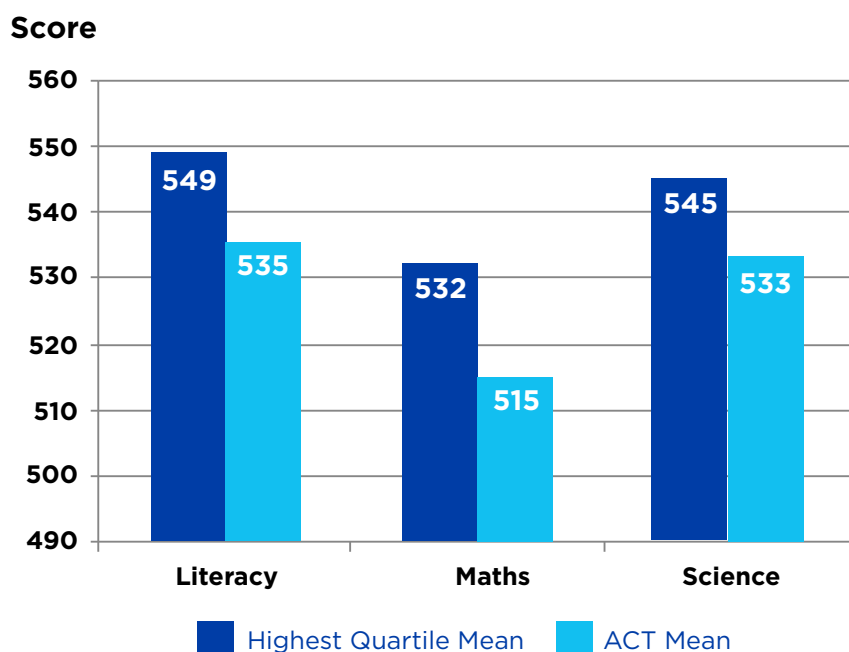


Figure 4: Australian Achievement Trends on PISA 2000-2018

Source: <https://www.acer.org/au/pisa/key-findings-2018>



**Figure 5: ACT Performance on PISA, 2018.
Comparison to Mean for Highest Quartile of Socio-Economic Advantage**

Derived from Australian Council for Educational Research, *PISA 2018 - Reporting Australia's Results, Vol. I*.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Thomson, S, De Bertoli, L, Underwood, C and Schmid, M. 2018: *PISA 2018 - Reporting Australia's Results, Vol. I*. Available at: <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1035&context=ozpisa>

⁵⁹ https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_AUS.pdf: p 5

⁶⁰ Thomson, S, De Bertoli, L, Underwood, C and Schmid, M. 2018: *PISA 2018 - Reporting Australia's Results, Vol. I*. Available at: <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1035&context=ozpisa>; pp 48 and 81 (Literacy); 129 and 161 (Maths); 191 and 221 (Science).

2.3.2 TIMSS

The Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) is administered to an international sample of students in Years 4 and 8 of schooling, every four years. The latest iteration was in 2019. In the ACT, 563 Year 4 students; and 973 Year 8 students participated.

ACT mean Maths and Science scores were well below the means used for assessing socio-economic advantage in both Year 4, and Year 8.⁶¹

Further, ACT Maths Year 4 mean decreased, and there was a decrease in percentage of high performers. Conversely, the mean scores for NSW, VIC, QLD and SA increased.⁶²

ACT, national and international assessments all point to a long-term underperformance in the ACT on Literacy, Numeracy, and Science. But latest results for other comparable countries such as the USA and the UK on PISA, show improvement; indicating that the decline is neither inevitable nor irreversible.

3. // What are the Causes?

Factors affecting the ACT Education system's effectiveness can be grouped into four main categories: System Structures and Funding; Leadership and Culture; Teacher Education and Practice; and Curriculum.

Figure 6 represents the analytic approach used to identify key issues that over time have likely been involved in the underperformance of the system; and to develop strategies that can be implemented to improve educational outcomes.

The main issues affecting performance of the ACT Education system are described below, using the four categories as a framework.

⁶¹ Thomson, S, Wernert, N, Rodrigues, S, and O'Grady, E. 2019: *TIMSS 2019 - Australia*, Vol I, available at: https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=timss_2019; pp 25,35,55,66, 97, 107, 127, 137, 138

⁶² https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=timss_2019 pp 27,28

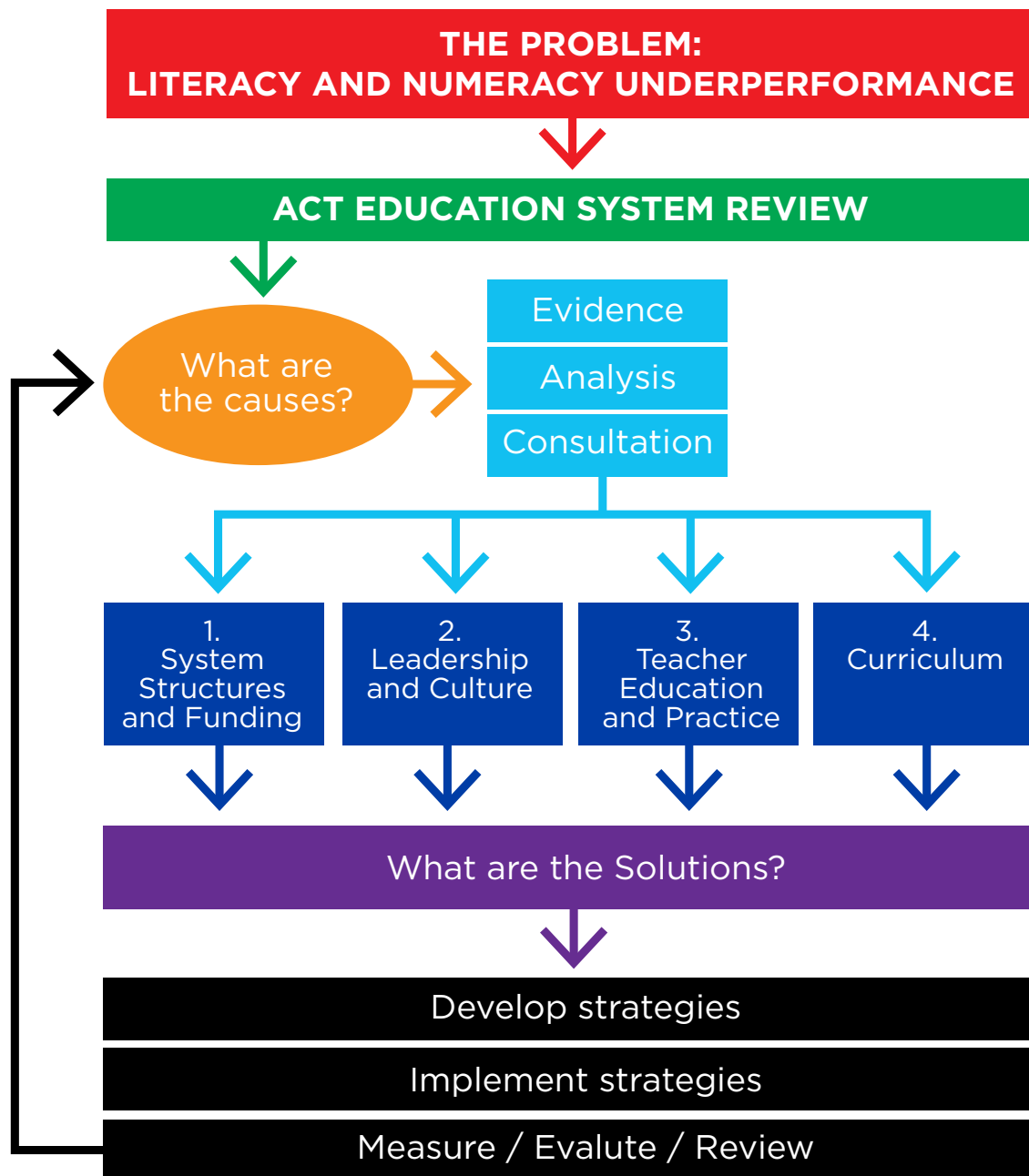


Figure 6: Process for ACT Education System Review

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.

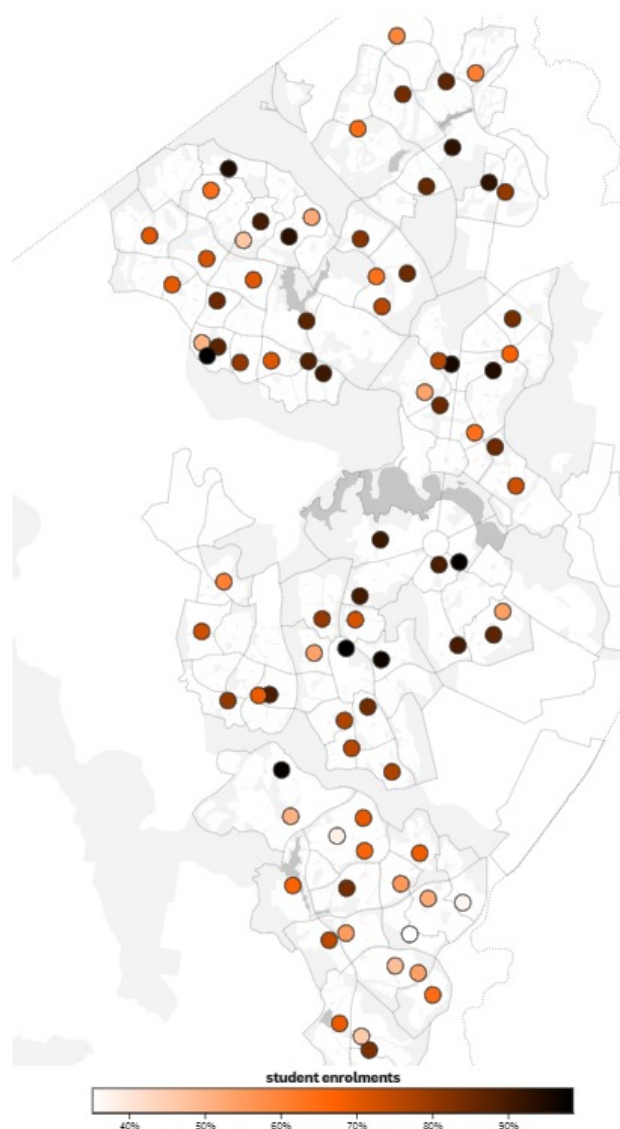


Figure 7: Student enrolments in the ACT 2020

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/aspa-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, Elloise, 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

1. Improving Falling Academic Standards <i>Exceptional Teaching + Focused Curriculum</i>	<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
2. Genuine Equity for Every Student <i>Creating Real Opportunity</i>	<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
3. Reducing Bullying and Violence <i>Stronger Leadership + Positive School Cultures</i>	<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
4. More Support for Schools though Better Funding and Governance <i>More Effective Funding + Better Governance</i>	<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
5. Fixing Overcrowded Schools + Ageing Infrastructure <i>Realistic Planning + Better Management</i>	<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

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

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*



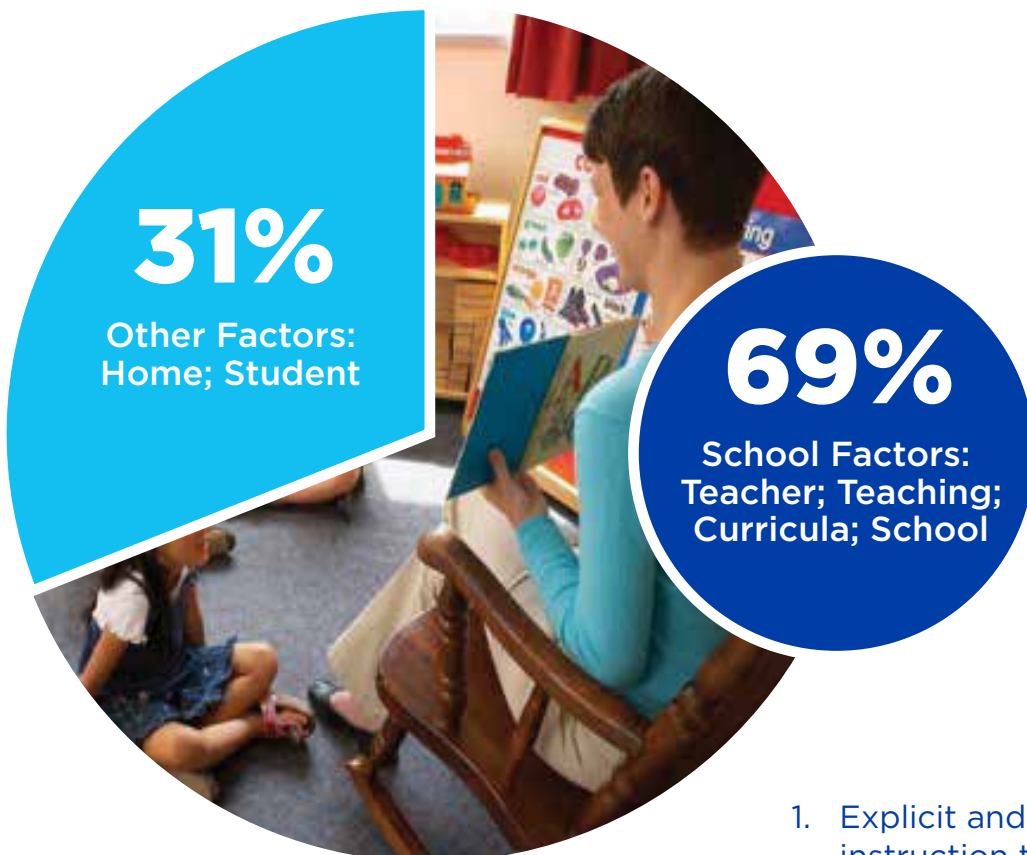


Figure 10: Over 69% of factors that have a high impact on student learning are under the control of schools

(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

There are students whose behaviour presents real challenges to the existing [ACT] school systems as they currently function, and who require significant support to succeed at school. ACT school leaders believe that the proportion of students with complex needs and challenging behaviour is increasing, and this observation appears to be supported by other evidence.

Students reported being affected by a range of disruptive behaviours at school and some mentioned occurrences of physical violence or other potentially dangerous or distressing situations. Students with a disability also reported difficulties with being distracted and negatively affected by some other students. Teachers and school leaders expressed many concerns about some students' psychological and mental health issues, behaviour related to environmental circumstances, and behaviour related to students' disability. They noted instances of violent and destructive behaviour and concerns about their own ability to respond effectively to protect student safety. Stakeholder perceptions were diverse and sometimes competing. For example, while expressing support for the right of every child to attend a mainstream school, some parents/carers feared that their own child's learning was being disrupted and their safety threatened by students with complex needs and challenging behaviour. Teachers said they wanted to make a positive difference for students with complex needs and challenging behaviour; but some expressed uncertainty and real concern about lacking necessary skills and resources to do this, while others expressed enthusiasm for the challenge.



Every group of students faces a different set of challenges; and the solutions therefore must be similarly varied. But in every case, the question is: How can we best enable participation and learning progress for this student? Equity and opportunity for every individual within a framework of strong social cohesion needs to be the goal.

Considerations for Genuine Equity and Real Opportunity:

1. Students with disabilities, including autism: How can we best support students in their learning? What are the relative merits of participation in mainstream classrooms, and/or special needs schools? What other options are there? What training or support might teachers need? How can we improve physical access to schools?
2. First Nations Australian students: How can we support these students to maintain and understand their heritage; language; and culture? How can we support their learning?
3. Economic disadvantage and other hardship: What initiatives work best to support and maintain engagement in the school system?
4. Ethnic minorities and migrants: How can we support students' transition into Australian society whilst valuing their cultural heritage?
5. Gifted and talented students: How can we provide these students with the extension that they need? Streaming in classes/schools? Selective government high schools? Something else?
6. Religious beliefs: How can we help encourage understanding of others' religious beliefs? Should a social sciences curriculum include units on comparative religion as an integral feature of general education?
7. Education of Girls: How to continue and extend greater uptake of STEM subjects?
8. Education of Boys: How to develop a wider range of positive male role models for all students, but particularly boys, including addressing the shortage of male teachers?
9. LGBTQI+ and gender identification: How can we improve support, and provide access to age-appropriate information?
10. Challenging behaviour issues: What suite of mainstream school and educational alternatives need to be provided to enable students to continue to engage with learning?



5.3 // Reducing Bullying and Violence: Stronger Leadership + Positive School Cultures

5.3.1 Reducing Bullying and Violence

Schools experience the same challenges as other parts of society in relation to bullying and violence. Measures to eliminate violence outside school environments may contribute to the elimination of bullying and violence within schools. This requires an ongoing public commitment to changes in attitudes and beliefs associated with violence.¹⁴⁸

Cyber-bullying, bullying and violence are a growing concern in ACT schools, as they are in wider society. The root causes of bullying and violence clearly extend beyond the school yard; and the attitudes that give rise to these behaviours are learned. Attitudinal change takes time but is achievable. Successful public health campaigns to reduce smoking; and for the wearing of seat belts, are examples.

System-level policies, school-level interventions and community engagement are all essential components of any concerted effort to reduce the incidence of anti-social behaviour in our schools. In 2019, the ACT Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs completed a report: *Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools*. In addition to commenting on the societal underpinnings of bullying and violence, the Inquiry also noted inconsistencies between schools in how they respond to incidents of bullying and violence, due to school

principals exercising “considerable autonomy”.¹⁴⁹

The ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS) is concerned about this approach, and they are “not clear why each school requires individual procedures, and how this is a necessary function of school autonomy.” The Council has recommended that the Directorate:

*Implement consistent approaches to policy and procedure on violence and bullying across all ACT schools. This will create consistent expectations of student safety and will benefit students and teachers who move between schools in the ACT.*¹⁵⁰

The Inquiry made 23 Recommendations regarding the management of these important issues, covering not only bullying between students, but also occupational violence (against staff).

¹⁴⁸ 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*; Finding 1, p x

¹⁴⁹ 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 x

¹⁵⁰ 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; p 7

Considerations for Bullying and Violence:

1. That a strong ACT Education System-wide suite of policies be developed to address bullying and violence, including cyberbullying, in the government school system.
2. That wide-spread consultation be ongoing with every stakeholder group and association with regard to continuous improvement of measures developed.
3. That the recommendations of the ACT Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools (2019) be reviewed as to status and implemented.

5.3.2 Leadership and Culture

High-quality school leadership is the practice of positively influencing individual and collective teaching expertise in a professional learning culture to secure a strong rate of progress for all learners.¹⁵¹

In addition to expert teaching skills, effective school principals need a comprehensive range of management skills, and the ability to inspire and lead their staff and students. School principals are responsible for implementing system-level interventions designed to limit bullying and violence.

By their actions, school leaders set the standards, tone and expectations that together create a school's culture. High quality schools have a strong positive culture that provides a safe environment for

learning and promotes excellence and achievement.

The right policy settings need to be in place to support the development of system-wide high quality school leadership.

Considerations for School Leadership and Culture:

1. Ensure that school principals have the right qualifications for leadership positions through a quality framework administered by the ACT Teacher Quality Institute.
2. Provide ongoing professional development opportunities in the full suite of leadership, governance and management functions to enable school leaders to improve their understanding in required areas, and to keep their knowledge current.
3. Articulate a clear framework of performance expectations linked to areas such as student outcomes; academic performance and staff development; financial management; accountability to school board; and community engagement.
4. Directorate to support school leaders in creating a cohesive school culture that emphasises similarities within the group, whilst celebrating and supporting diversity.

¹⁵¹ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership: Leading for impact: Australian guidelines for school leadership development, n.d. Available at: aitsl.edu.au



5.4 // More Support for Schools though Better Funding and Governance: More Effective Funding + Better Governance

5.4.1 Governance and School Autonomy

There has been a strong political consensus that greater school autonomy and local decision making improves public education. There is little evidence for this consensus. Instead, evidence indicates greater autonomy has increased inequalities across education systems.¹⁵²

The existing model of school autonomy has gradually devolved more and more responsibility to individual schools. Instead of a strong system of government schools, we have a collection of schools responsible for staffing; managing their own assets and maintenance schedules; performing their own complex analyses of assessment data; formulating policies on bullying and violence; the use of personal mobile devices; technology in the classroom; curriculum; and teaching practice.

Some of these processes and decisions may more usefully be undertaken at a system level. School leaders need the time to focus on their core business: ensuring the best possible education for their students. This would also mean that every government school would be “on the same page” with policy and direction; and more consistency would facilitate movement between schools where needed.

¹⁵² 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

¹⁵³ Woo, Eddie: Australian Local Hero 2018 and high-profile Mathematics teacher, interviewed by ABC One Plus One posted 21 Aug 2020

Considerations for Governance:

1. Review governance and autonomy structures within the ACT education system to ensure a better balance between system-wide policy and decision making, and school autonomy to enable schools to focus on their core business of Literacy and Numeracy in Primary School; depth of learning in Secondary School; and future pathways in College.
2. Benchmark models being adopted in other states, including *NSW's School Success Model*, which aims to improve support offered to schools so that they can “lift capability”, whilst freeing time for them to focus and learning and teaching.
3. Ensure that existing and new policies are built not just on a foundation of evidence; but on a foundation of relevant and rigorous evidence.
4. Provide centralised professional data analysis of national and international assessments to assist schools to understand and implement findings in a timely fashion.
5. Ensure feedback channels are easily available to all stakeholders so that the Directorate is able to access information on policy and program effectiveness from a range of sources.
6. Revise and/or develop system-level policy to enable consistency across the government school system on a range of issues, including but not limited to:
 - Use of personal electronic devices at school, in and out of class time.
 - Use and extent of use of technology in the classroom to support learning.
 - Management of behaviour issues, including bullying and violence.
 - School enrolment processes and guidelines including priority enrolment area management.
 - The role of school boards in governance.
 - Management of school infrastructure and maintenance.
7. Investigate the effectiveness of a separate oversight body and reporting structure for non-government schools (Independent and Catholic schools), in order to clarify and streamline governance and decision-making structures for both government and non-government Education sectors.

Rigorous research and evidence need to be the foundations of governance and funding settings to direct the course for ACT Education.¹⁵³

We've got to make decisions. We've got to change policies and structures to enable the work that matters in schools to flourish.

Eddie Woo, Australian Local Hero 2018 Highly acclaimed Mathematics Teacher

5.4.2 Funding to Where It's Needed

Taxpayers are now fully aware of the billions upon billions of dollars spent on schooling, but it is the human cost that should occupy our minds... For thousands of young people the dismal reality is that they lack the essential knowledge and skills that enable individuals to thrive.¹⁵⁴

The ACT per capita spending on Education is second highest in Australia; but Literacy and Numeracy outcomes are still declining.

There is little evidence of policy and program evaluation¹⁵⁵ in the ACT Education Directorate Annual Report 2019-2020, or elsewhere. Evidence from many other jurisdictions points to the fact that funding of widely implemented strategies does not necessarily mean that these strategies are effective.

Funding needs to be invested in what works.

¹⁵⁴ Mueller, F., 27 Jan 2020: 'Human cost of failing the education test', *The Canberra Times*

¹⁵⁵ 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

¹⁵⁶ Fahey, G. Dec 2020: Dollars and Sense: Time for smart reform of Australian school funding, *Centre for Independent Studies*

Considerations for Funding:

1. Maintain school funding, whilst making it work more effectively through smart reform in investment.¹⁵⁶ This means a thorough review of where education funding goes; and rigorous evaluation of value-for-money in programs to generate either improved learning outcomes directly; or indirectly by way of creating support to achieve those outcomes.
2. The biggest influence on learning outcomes is teacher quality. Funding initiatives need to be directed to the entire system of teacher training, professional development and career pathways to attract and retain high quality teachers.
3. Approaches that are widely implemented elsewhere, or popular, should not be adopted without careful review of their evidence base and actual success in improving learning. For example, money invested in teacher quality improvement is much more effective than small changes in class size.
4. Regular measurement and review processes should be built into every new initiative, program, study, or policy to make evaluation of their success straightforward. Every new initiative should have stated outcomes that can be measured quantitatively or qualitatively.
5. Careful consideration should be given to how technology in classrooms can be fine-tuned according to subject need and learning outcomes to ensure that investment is supporting learning.



5.4.3 Evidence-based Decisions and Practice

Governments are responsible for making policy decisions to improve the quality of life for individuals and the population. Using a scientific approach to investigate all available evidence can lead to policy decisions that are more effective in achieving desired outcomes as decisions are based on accurate and meaningful information.¹⁵⁷

*Australian Bureau of Statistics
A guide for using statistics for
evidence-based policy, 2010.*

The recognition of the importance of evidence-based decision making and practice is not new. It has been the underpinning of modern healthcare for decades. The Australian Bureau of Statistics advocated such practice more than ten years ago.

Although there is general agreement about the need for the approach in Education, the extent to which genuine, relevant, and rigorous evidence is used in reality is variable. For example, case studies from a few sources does not amount to rigorous evidence on which to base important decisions. Poorly designed research with a small sample does not carry the same weight as a large well-designed research study.

Further, ACT government schools have a patchy record with regard to the use of student performance data to inform decision making. As the ACT Auditor-General commented:

Annual external reviews of ACT public schools have consistently identified shortcomings in ACT public schools' analysis of student performance information and the use of this data to inform specific and tailored educational instruction. Improving

the performance of schools in the targeted use of data needs special attention by the Education Directorate.¹⁵⁸

Considerations for Evidence-Based Practice:

1. Initial teacher education needs to include content in critical thinking, assessment, and evaluation of evidence in the context of classroom teaching and practice.
2. Assessment data from national and international sources needs to be analysed by experts in a timely fashion.
3. Information needs to be distributed to those who use it, when they need it, in useable form.
4. School performance targets should be "set in the context of the performance of schools with statistically similar characteristics."¹⁵⁹
5. Decisions at every level of management, including School Leaders, need to be based on rigorous relevant evidence, and justification for decisions documented.
6. Content of teacher education degrees needs to be based on rigorous evidence and proven approaches.
7. Professional development options need to be in place for the development of assessment and evaluation tools, and in the analysis and interpretation of results.
8. Review and streamline school autonomy structures to better support school leaders in creating strong positive school cultures and enabling teaching and learning excellence.
9. Ensure rigorous timely evaluation of all policies and programs to ensure that funding is directed to what works.
10. Information and records management systems, archives and access need to be reviewed.

5.5 // Fixing Overcrowded Schools + Ageing Infrastructure: Realistic Planning + Better Management

So concerning are the issues with infrastructure management and capacity that in February 2021 the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion resolved to inquire into and report on the management of ACT school infrastructure, on a range of issues, including:

- the management of hazardous substances and materials in schools;
- planning for the ongoing maintenance of school facilities, including the process to identify and address current and future infrastructure needs in schools;
- the management of capacity issues in schools, including the use of temporary facilities for schools running above capacity and the plans for schools running below capacity;
- the adequacy of heating and cooling systems in schools;
- the demand for sporting facilities on school grounds and measures to address this demand;
- classroom design;
- the environmental sustainability of school infrastructure and facilities;
- the adequacy of parking and bike storage facilities;
- accessibility for students and staff with disabilities;
- accessibility of school facilities by local communities;
- any other relevant matters.

One submission to the Inquiry observed that “there is a lack of wholistic planning to manage school capacity across inner north primary and high schools. There remains a real crisis in school capacity across the inner north of the ACT which the Education Directorate is doing little to address in any long-term wholistic manner.”

Another submission was concerned in particular about ageing infrastructure:

*Built in 1969, many classrooms are still original to the school. The classrooms holding home economics are the original classrooms, and thus over 50-years in age. Not only are they insufficient for the modern needs of students, they are inefficient in terms of heating/cooling and other energy use. They provide a safety risk due to their lead paint and have accessibility issues for both staff and students with disabilities and other needs. In addition, they struggle to meet the general needs of students and have limited opportunities to extend their use to vocational learning.*¹⁶⁰

The ACT Council of Parents and Citizens’ Associations has recommended that a centralised property management team be set up, as schools “struggled to keep up with maintenance and enrolment growth”.¹⁶¹

The Inquiry will report by the end of 2021.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ ABS, 20 Oct 2010: 1500.0 - “A guide for using statistics for evidence based policy, 2010”

¹⁵⁸ ACT Auditor-General’s Report, 4/2017 (May): *Performance Information in ACT Public Schools*, p 3

¹⁵⁹ 2020: *The School Success Model*, NSW Department of Education; p 2

¹⁶⁰ Mt Stromlo High School P&C, 29 April 2021: Submission; Inquiry into the management of ACT infrastructure; p 2

¹⁶¹ Lansdown, S. Wed 19 May, 2021: ‘Schools don’t make grade on disability.’ *The Canberra Times*; p 11

¹⁶² <https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/in-committees/committees/eci/inquiry-into-the-management-of-act-school-infrastructure#tab1696389-2id>

5.5.1 Overcrowded Schools

School capacity is a major issue in the ACT. Full utilisation of school infrastructure is affected by changing demographics; new suburb development; urban infill; priority enrolment policies; and the reputation of the school. All of these factors are either directly or indirectly under the control of the government - and are foreseeable.

Considerations for School Capacity:

1. Longer term demographic forecasting to enable more accurate projections of need.
2. Construction of new schools should be concurrent with suburb development.
3. Over time a stronger more coherent government school system with high quality school leadership, teaching, and student outcomes across the system should reduce capacity pressures on individual schools.
4. The general raising of standards across the government school system would also reduce some of the issues with priority enrolment areas.

5.5.2 Ageing Infrastructure

A report by the ACT Auditor-General in 2019 detailed many issues in government school asset management.¹⁶³ The main issues are: that although there is a framework for management of school infrastructure assets, implementation of that framework is poor or variable at the individual school level due to “poor supporting systems and processes”; software purchased to facilitate asset management had

been populated in only two of 88 (now 89) schools; and consistent budget over-runs with maintenance. There have been recent issues with a number of ageing school buildings still requiring remediation and removal of toxic substances such as lead and asbestos, at significant cost.

Considerations for Ageing Infrastructure:

1. Ageing infrastructure is not only a maintenance issue; it is also an issue as to whether buildings that are decades old are still fit-for-purpose in a modern educational setting.
2. Central management of school infrastructure and maintenance schedules could lead to better overall outcomes across government schools in terms of quality and cost, and less administration for individual schools.
3. The rolling program of building condition assessments by the Education Directorate should be recommenced.
4. The elimination of risk from toxic substances in school buildings (for example, lead paint; asbestos) must be completed in a timely fashion.
5. A detailed schedule for retiring and replacing ageing infrastructure assets should be maintained and followed.
6. The use of transportable buildings needs to be a temporary solution to over-capacity issues. Some ACT government schools have had temporary buildings for over 30 years.
7. Consideration needs to be given to how best to utilise schools that are chronically under-capacity.

¹⁶³ ACT Auditor-General Report No 11 of 2019: *Maintenance of ACT Government School Infrastructure*

6. // Conclusions

Every Australian State and Territory has been part of the general slide in literacy, numeracy and science outcomes that has become a feature of national and international assessments for a decade. The ACT has its own particular difficulties arising out of systemic stagnation, and far from being a star performer, is consistently below other regions of similar socio-economic advantage in outcomes.

These downward trends are not inevitable, and several international examples of dramatic improvement in educational outcomes demonstrate that improvement is achievable.

There are two major reasons why improvement in learning outcomes is so important, if indeed such an aim needs any explanation: firstly, in the national interest, we need a future workforce that is able to rise to the challenges of a technology-driven world.

But secondly, as any parent will tell you, “I just want my child to be happy.” The most potent way we can support children and young people to achieve this universal goal is to provide a challenging, supportive, and effective education system that brings out the best in every child.

A comprehensive independent review of the ACT Education System is needed. Terms of Reference for an independent review into the ACT Education System form Appendix A.



TERMS OF REFERENCE

For an Independent Review into the ACT Education System

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

Purpose: To review the ACT Education System (“the System”); and to make recommendations to ensure that its structures, processes and policies work effectively to support a cohesive government school system that delivers greater equity and opportunity; and stronger learning gains for every student.

The Review will investigate, report and make findings on the operation of all relevant aspects of the System, including but not limited to the effectiveness of:

1. ACT Education System Structures
 - a. Balance between system-level governance and school autonomy
 - b. Funding and how it is allocated
 - c. Equity of access to education
 - d. Management of school culture, including bullying and violence
 - e. Management of school capacity and infrastructure
2. Teacher Education System and Practice
 - a. Teacher training standards, including teacher degree entry requirements
 - b. Course content in teaching degrees
 - c. Evidence base for current trends in teaching practice
 - d. Issues in teacher workforce and recruitment including career paths
 - e. School Leadership and professional development
3. Curriculum
 - a. The extent to which the Australian curriculum is implemented consistently across ACT government schools

The Review will:

- engage in a comprehensive community and stakeholder consultation process.
- have regard to National policy developments and reports.
- have regard to any significant lessons to be drawn from other Australian jurisdictions as well as perspectives from international jurisdictions where educational outcomes have been improved.

Canberra
Liberals