



Submission to The House Standing Committee on
Employment, Education and Training inquiry into and
report on adult literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving
skills in Australia

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Please indicate your name if an individual, or your organisation name if you are responding on behalf of an organisation

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The Australian Council of State School Organisations is a peak community organisation and the
One voice for every child in public education

Do you wish your submission to be treated as confidential?

No

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

SUBMISSION TO THE

HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING INQUIRY INTO AND REPORT ON ADULT LITERACY, NUMERACY AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS IN AUSTRALIA

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the one voice for every child in public education in Australia. As an organisation, ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into and report on adult literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills in Australia.

ACSSO is committed to access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence, and participatory democracy.

Australia is a multicultural and democratic society in which every individual has the right to achieve personal fulfillment while respecting the rights of others and developing cooperative relationships essential to living in society.

ACSSO believes that education is integral to both the development of the individual and the development of society and it both reflects and exercises an influence on the values, attitudes, and practices of society.

The aim of education is to help the individual to develop fully as a person and as a member of society. A high-quality education, therefore, is in the interests of a society as a whole and is the right of every individual. Education is a lifelong process which neither begins nor ends with formal schooling or formal education, although the role of the school is crucial in the development of individuals, and through them society.

ACSSO's position is that a high-quality education will enable individuals to:

- a) become independent and self-directed learners;
- b) develop fully their own talents, values and interests;
- c) develop a sense of identity and respect for self, for community and the environment;
- d) meet challenges;
- e) participate in decision making at various levels.

A high-quality education will contribute to the development of a just society by ensuring that all Australians acquire skills and understanding to empower them to actively participate in and shape the society in which they live.

1. The relationship between adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills and socio-demographic characteristics, particularly migrant status, First Nations status and individuals living in households that have experienced intergenerational unemployment;

In rural and remote Indigenous communities in Australia there are minimal labour market opportunities, yet Indigenous communities are under increasing pressure from governments to build sustainable communities with a social, cultural, and economic capital base, and share responsibility for community well-being and capacity building. Simultaneously, the delivery of primary and secondary Indigenous education is under great scrutiny as outcomes fall behind commensurate levels in the wider Australian society.

With entrenched inequities and complex challenges, achieving better education services and, consequently, improving educational outcomes for rural and remote Indigenous communities is not an easy task. It will require a significant and long-term commitment, with a consistent and cooperative effort across all Australian governments.

Research has shown that higher cognitive skills, such as literacy and numeracy, are associated with greater labour force participation and higher earnings. The research available to ACSSO has shown that, at the national level, proficiency scores in literacy and numeracy are lower among the Aboriginal population than the non-Aboriginal population. Since the association between education and skills is strong, it is possible that the skills gap between these populations is partly attributed to differences in educational outcomes.

The question ACSSO believes the House Standing Committee should be asking is, *how closely are adult basic competencies and skills related to educational attainment in Indigenous communities?*

It is through their oral and other traditions, that Indigenous people pass on their history, customs, and values. Oral traditions also teach practical skills, such as house building, hunting, collection and preparation of medicinal plants, healing ceremonies, and knowledge of fishing spots and migratory routes. It is these transferrable competencies and skills that need to also be considered when evaluating educational attainment.

The skills, resources and networks in every community are harnessed and strengthened to support people to live well, and to contribute to their communities where they can and wish to. Australia as a nation must develop cultural agility to work respectfully, knowledgeably, and effectively with Indigenous people. Being open to unfamiliar experiences.

2. The effect that literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual's labour force participation and wages.

Perhaps never before have so many people from so many different sectors of our society been concerned about adult literacy. Numerous reports published in the last decade have indicated that a growing proportion of the Australian population lacks adequate literacy skills, and many employers say they cannot find enough workers with the literacy, numeracy, and other competencies required in the workplace. Changing economic, demographic, and labour market forces may exacerbate the problem in the future.

A literate and numerate population is the goal of any industrialised society. Literacy and numeracy skills carry the means by which children are equipped for the education processes on which their location in the adult world will depend. As Australia's cultural identity is also underpinned by the knowledge and skills transmitted from one generation to the next, basic skills also give access to our cultural heritage and values. Thirty years ago, basic skills were desirable attributes, but their absence did not necessarily deny the individual without them the ability to function in the adult world. Large areas of employment depending on unskilled work demanded little in terms of literacy and numeracy. Qualifications also did not count for much in such areas of the labour market and what employees needed to know to do the job was learnt on the job itself.

Workplace numeracy, literacy and employability skills are often used in conjunction with one another. The required skills often overlap and are necessary for any task, for example, completing a job might entail gathering and analysing information; using number or mathematical skills;

reporting; using computers; working within a team setting; and possibly demonstrating some initiative.

As a society, we inherently reward higher literacy. There is an assumption that better educated people have superior literacy and numeracy skills. In fact, there is an expectation by employers that higher education graduates will possess high literacy and numeracy skills along with a high level of academic achievement. Those who are marginal to the labour market, however, such as the longer term unemployed, tend to have more significant challenges in these areas.

3. Links between literacy and social outcomes such as health, poverty, ability to care for other family members and participation in civic life.

The ability to successfully handle stress and negotiate life challenges is critical to positively and resiliently adapting to the demands of a vibrant, fast-paced, 21st century. The vital importance of the first three years of life, particularly in establishing social and emotional interconnections that give children resilience and strength to meet later difficulties, has been increasingly recognised in recent years. Family engagement with their children's formal or school learning is considered to be one pathway through which socio-economic factors influence child competencies. The optimal development of infants and young children should be an Australian priority. Support for families, both pre and antenatal, is critical, as foetal development and infancy are vital periods of rapid physical, physiological, and neurological growth. This growth is reflected in the cognitive, physical, and social-emotional aspects of early childhood development.

It is through interactions with others, in combination with exposure to literacy, that children learn to interpret who they are in relation to others, gain an understanding of their social world, and develop social competence. Exposure to literacy-rich practices and materials promotes the development of language, vocabulary, comprehension, and communication skills all of which are critical components of social competence.

Studies have shown that meaningful verbal interactions and activities such as shared book reading and storytelling enhance the development of a secure attachment between children and parents/caregivers, laying the foundation for the development of social competence and social support.

4. Whether changes to schooling in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 will have a disproportionate impact on the skill development of those children of parents with lower literacy and numeracy levels, and, if yes, consideration of appropriate remediation programs which might address this.

The COVID-19 pandemic created the largest disruption in the history of Australia's education system. Before the pandemic, Australia (according to government reports) was already facing formidable challenges in the positive delivery of primary and secondary educational outcomes.

Australia escaped the recession that impacted many countries but the cost to Australia will have lasting effects on its economy and public finances. The Australian Government needs to protect and increase education funding to the government school sector as a top priority and address inequities in education spending. Strengthening the resilience of the government education system will enable

Australia to respond to the immediate challenges and position schools to better cope with future crises. In this regard, the government should focus on access, equality, equity of outcomes and inclusion at all levels of the system.

The massive efforts made in a short time to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic to education should remind us that change is possible. We need to seize the opportunity to find new ways to address the learning crisis. Focusing our efforts to: -

- address why young people are not engaging in education, particularly in marginalized groups,
- actively supporting family engagement,
- supporting the teaching profession and teachers' readiness,
- expand the definition of the right to education to include connectivity and remove barriers to connectivity,
- improve the articulation and flexibility across levels and types of education and training,
- relevance and connectedness of curriculum to their world and the world of work,
- strengthen the school to work programs.

“You can't lose something you never had” In response to the COVID-19 education crisis, schools were leveraging technology and remote learning to continue education for their students during school closures. Whilst technology was instrumental in providing continued education, the questions that need answering are:

- how effective was technology in reaching all students affected by school closures?
- how many students did not have a quiet place to study?
- how many schools had an online support capacity?
- how many teachers did not have the necessary pedagogical and technical skills to integrate technology into education?
- How many families did not have access to the technology and/or suitable internet access in the home?

In addition to technology, communication during a crisis is always a challenge and even more so with the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst schools communicated constantly the message was not clear. The good relationship between families and schools, which is a key factor in positive student outcomes had not been achieved in many instances and attempting to do so during the crisis was like shutting the gate after the horse has bolted.

Strong partnerships between family and school are built on on-going good communication and trust.

5. The availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy educational programs in Australia and internationally;

COVID-19 has made social inequalities such as disability, employment status, income, language, and social status – more visible and piercing. These inequalities have also deeply affected access and participation to lifelong learning education. Additionally, as schools, colleges and universities closed their campuses, the ‘vulnerable’ were left without a physical safe haven, while disadvantaged families had no or limited access to equipment or connectivity to take full advantage of online and digital learning.

All Australians, regardless of their employment status, must be supported to develop skills to achieve productivity gains and ensure they can live healthy, autonomous, and full lives. Adults need

adequate literacy to comprehend health information, understand government information and services, get job-ready and maintain a connection during times of rapid change.

The adult learning sector, while facing particularly difficult financial conditions, continues to demonstrate its resilience by going above and beyond to provide flexible, learner-centred solutions to keep adults in education and reach the most vulnerable groups.

6. International comparisons of government policies and programs that may be adapted to the Australian experience.

To study and compare global policies, we need to be very mindful of the conceptual categories that are used, in large part because the name of the category might remain the same, the meaning of that category such as the state, or nation, or indeed what we understand education to be, has changed. For example, Finland's high outcomes in the PISA tests have, since its inception catapulted it and its education system into the world spotlight. Whilst it is recognised that many of its successes stem from distinctly societal and cultural features their education system has features that are supported by policies. It would require the study of these policies and how they interact with their society etc to aid with Australian policy development rather than wholesale borrowing or transfer of education policy. As the House Standing Committee would realise the nature of policy and the ways in which it can be researched, interpreted, and produced is open to debate. With the limited resources available to ACSSO we are unable to provide an informed observation in this area. To assist ACSSO in its advocacy role we engage the support of our national and international partners.