



Submission to the Schools for Our Future Inquiry

A National Inquiry into Australia's Public School Infrastructure established by the Australian Education Union

30 June 2026

About the Australian Coalition for School Libraries

The [Australian Coalition for School Libraries](#) (ACSL) is a sector committee of the [Australian Library and Information Association](#) (ALIA) and provides a united and professional voice to advocate for Australian school libraries and school library staff. The Coalition comprises representatives from state- and national-based school library associations, including:

- Australian School Library Association (ASLA)
- Queensland School Library Association (QSLA)
- School Library Association of New South Wales (SLANSW)
- School Library Association of South Australia (SLASA)
- School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV)
- Western Australian School Library Association (WASLA)

ACSL asserts that school libraries are essential educational infrastructure and advocates for a future where all Australian students have access to well-resourced school libraries with qualified and supported staff.

Overview

ACSL commends the decision of the Australian Education Union (AEU) to conduct an inquiry into Australia's public school infrastructure, and welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to [Schools for Our Future](#). We strongly agree that “high quality public schools are essential for equity, inclusion and to prepare every child for a rapidly changing world” and argue that school libraries are an essential part of this equation, as foundational to learning as classrooms, laboratories and sports facilities.

We submit to Australia's governments must explicitly include school libraries. Investment in school libraries, alongside qualified teacher librarians and resources, as essential infrastructure for all schools is among the most evidence-based and cost-effective actions available to governments seeking to improve student outcomes. Yet they remain critically underfunded, understaffed and invisible in national data collection.

This submission draws on ACSL's previous advocacy, including:

- [ACSL Submission to the National Cultural Policy](#) (May 2026)
- [ACSL Submission to the Better and Fairer Schools \(Funding and Reform\) Bill 2024 \[Provisions\]](#) (October 2024)

We also encourage the inquiry to reference the following formal statements, which are available on our [website](#):

- ALIA ACSL Statement on School Library Funding and Resource Provision
- ALIA ACSL Statement on School Library Staffing

The State of School Library Infrastructure in Australia

Australia is in the midst of a school library crisis that is both a cause and a consequence of educational inequity. Despite strong evidence of the positive impact of well-resourced school libraries on student literacy, wellbeing, and broader learning outcomes, the provision of school library services across the country is inconsistent, inequitable and declining.

There is currently no systematic national data collected on the provision, resourcing, or staffing of school libraries anywhere in Australia, making it impossible to quantify the full scale of the problem or target funding where it is most needed. However, the independent research that does exist paints a concerning picture. In a 2026 survey, Dymocks Children's Charities research found that large numbers of Queensland state schools had a \$0 book budget and no librarians.¹ The School Libraries in South Australia 2024 Census found that only 15 per cent of all schools in the state have a qualified teacher librarian, down from 23 per cent in 2019.² And more than half of respondents to the 2025 Australian School Library Survey reported their school library is not adequately staffed.³ Our own institutional knowledge confirms that in Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory it has become increasingly rare to find a public school with a school library staffed by qualified professionals.

This was not always the case. In the 1980s, all Australian state education departments had centralised school library advisory and support services. By the early 2010s, these services had ceased to exist. Government support for school libraries is now, at best, patchy. While New South Wales has a policy endorsing public libraries in every school⁴ and the ACT has made funding commitments to training teacher librarians,⁵ our understanding is that tracking and enforcement of these initiatives is poor. This demonstrates that a national approach, backed by federal leadership and funding, is necessary to ensure equity.

¹ Out of 47 state schools surveyed, 12 had no budget allocated for new books and 31 had either one or no librarian on staff. See reported in the Courier Mail et al, 12 Qld State Schools have no book budget, survey reveals, 26 March 2026.

² [School Libraries in South Australia 2024 Census](#)

³ [2025 Australian School Library Survey Report - ALIA Schools](#)

⁴ <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2005-0221>

⁵ [Delivering more teacher librarians for ACT public school - Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate](#)

This crisis does not exist in isolation. It reflects structural underfunding of public schools and an absence of national standards or accountability mechanisms for school libraries. As ACSL noted in its October 2024 [submission](#) on the *Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill*, lack of targeted funding has forced school leaders into the position of having to trade off their students' educational opportunities, choosing between the cost of running a school library and other important school services and facilities.

School Libraries as Infrastructure

School library infrastructure must be understood in both physical and human dimensions.

School library spaces - their design, accessibility, and resourcing with print and digital collections - are essential to learning and student wellbeing. Yet many school libraries across Australia are underfunded, undersized, or repurposed for other uses due to space pressures and budget constraints. The Inquiry should gather data on the physical condition and resourcing of school library spaces as part of its national assessment of infrastructure need.

But a physical space alone is not sufficient. As the [ALIA ACSL Statement on School Library Staffing](#) makes clear, school libraries must be led by qualified teacher librarians and library professionals to realise their educational impact. A room full of books without a skilled professional to curate the collection, teach information and digital literacy, and support reading development does not constitute a functioning school library. Yet staffing is precisely where the greatest decline has occurred, with the Australian School Library Survey showing a clear decline in reported staffing levels at government schools over the past 3 years.⁶ International research and Australian experience consistently indicates that decisions not to employ school librarians are driven by budget constraints rather than educational evidence, and the consequences are borne disproportionately by students in public schools and disadvantaged communities.⁷

The Impact of School libraries

The significant contribution and benefits of school libraries is long acknowledged and well evidenced. In 2011 the House Standing Committee on Education and Employment reviewed the evidence thoroughly for its report [School libraries and teacher librarians in 21st century Australia](#) and found that “research demonstrates a clear correlation between a good school library and teacher librarian and student achievement”.⁸

Australian and international research consistently demonstrates that access to a qualified school librarian improves student literacy and numeracy outcomes and supports students with diverse learning needs. School libraries are key to enabling reading for pleasure -

⁶ Table 12.2 - [2025 Softlink Australia School Library Survey Report.pdf](#). Over the same period Catholic school library staffing levels have remained stable, and Independent school library staffing has increased, based on reported figures.

⁷ See Antioch University Seattle research [SLIDE: School Librarian Investigation — Decline or Evolution?](#) as summarised in Debra E Kachel, [Perspectives on School Librarian Employment in the United States, 2009-10 to 2018-19](#), July 2021

⁸ See Chapter 3 of the report for a summary of the evidence. For specific examples, see Michele Lonsdale, [Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement: A Review of the Research](#), March 2003; Research Foundation Paper, [School Libraries Work!](#), 2016 (and its precedent reports in 2003, 2006 and 2008)

increasingly recognised internationally as the most powerful driver of child and adult literacy.⁹ Studies show that when students have access to a school library, reading enjoyment increases, along with reading frequency, self-reported reading ability, and positive attitudes towards reading.¹⁰ Research by the Australian Council for Educational Research has found that students in schools with qualified teacher librarians achieve higher NAPLAN literacy outcomes and links well-resourced libraries with qualified staff to higher student achievement overall.¹¹ There is also substantial evidence of the wellbeing benefits of school libraries, with multiple national and international studies finding that school libraries offer a sense of connection and belonging within a safe and caring environment.¹²

Despite this, the impact of school libraries and school librarians is overlooked by government and school leaders alike. The limited data available strongly points to inequity and disparity both between and within states with regards to the provision of school library services to Australian students and teachers. There is also significant disparity between school sectors. Wealthier Independent schools can support well-resourced school libraries and often employ a team of qualified staff, while government schools are increasingly directing limited resources elsewhere. The result is a significant gulf in student opportunity to access the benefits of school libraries, leading to inequitable academic and wellbeing outcomes.

This is in direct opposition to the intention of the [The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement \(2025-2034\)](#), with its aim to encourage and support every student to be the very best they can be. To ensure Australia has a world class education system, there is an immediate need for government leadership to provide adequate resources for schools and ensure nationally consistent data on student access to school library services to reach the goal of *all* Australian students having access to adequate school library services, regardless of postcode or socio-economic status.

Recommendations

ACSL calls on the AEU in its Schools for Our Future Inquiry to formally recognise school libraries as essential public school infrastructure, both in the sense of physical spaces and qualified staffing. Specifically, we propose the following recommendations to government:

1. That Australian governments commit to a target that every Australian public-school student has access to a well-resourced school library staffed by qualified library professionals, in alignment with the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025–2034) priority of equity and excellence.
2. That future capital and recurrent funding frameworks include school libraries as essential public school infrastructure, incorporating funding for both physical spaces and qualified staffing.

⁹ The UK Literacy Trust, for example, has an ongoing reading for pleasure strategy - see [Reading For Pleasure](#)

¹⁰ Christina Clark and Anne Teravainen-Goff (2018) [School libraries: Why children and young people use them or not, their literacy engagement and mental wellbeing Findings from our annual literacy survey 2017/2018](#), National Literacy Trust

¹¹ Hughes, H., Bozorgian, H., Allan, C. & Dicinoski, M. (2013). [School libraries, teacher-librarians and their contribution to student literacy development in Gold Coast schools: Research report](#). School Library Association of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology

¹² A good summary of relevant research is available at Danielle Raffaele, [Cultivating the 'Third Place' in school libraries to support student wellbeing](#), School Library Association of Victoria

3. That all Australian governments collaboratively develop a strategy to collect systematic data on the provision, resourcing, staffing, and physical condition of school libraries across all jurisdictions, to enable evidence-based funding decisions and accountability for equity.
4. That school library staffing and resourcing be reported as components of school funding equity, particularly for priority equity cohorts including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students in regional and remote areas, students with disability, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

In addition, we recommend that the AEU itself examine the impact of declining school library staffing on teacher workload and make recommendations to address school library human infrastructure as part of workforce sustainability planning.

Responses to Key Questions

1. Enrolment growth, uneven demand & inconsistent data

Should governments be required to meet a national reporting standard for school infrastructure, including nationally consistent data on the condition of classrooms and buildings and current and projected future enrolments at each school?

a) What would an effective reporting standard look like?

b) What measures should be included?

One of the most significant barriers to addressing the school library infrastructure crisis is the absence of national data. Currently, no government agency in Australia systematically collects data on:

- The number of school libraries operating in each state and territory
- The staffing levels and qualifications of school library staff
- The resourcing and funding of school library collections and programs
- The physical condition and adequacy of school library spaces

This data void impacts the interpretation of trends in student progress and outcomes and hinders the full evaluation of interventions to improve academic achievement and student wellbeing. It means that equity gaps cannot be identified, funding cannot be targeted effectively, and accountability cannot be maintained. It also means that the aspirations of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement - to put every school on a path to full and fair funding - cannot be fully realised for school libraries. This is why ACSL has consistently called for the development of national reporting on the provision, resourcing, and staffing of school libraries.

An effective reporting standard would treat school libraries as a distinct, named component of school infrastructure reporting, rather than allowing them to be subsumed into broader categories such as “learning spaces” or “general facilities”, where they currently disappear from view. It should require every jurisdiction to report against a common set of definitions on an annual basis, so that data is comparable across states and territories and over time,

and should be published openly rather than released only in response to Freedom of Information requests. Most importantly, the reporting should include staff numbers and qualifications – for example, by having the My School website include statistical information about the breakdown of all specialist teachers, including teacher librarians, as recommended by the 2011 Commonwealth Government Report [School libraries and teacher librarians in 21st century Australia](#).

At minimum, ACSL recommends the standard capture:

- whether each school has a designated library space and its size relative to enrolment
- whether the library is staffed, and by whom (qualified teacher librarian, library technician, teacher, volunteer, or unstaffed)
- the annual budget allocated to library collections and programs
- the age and condition of the library space and its inclusion in capital works planning
- opening hours and patterns of use.

Collected consistently, these measures would allow the identification of equity gaps by sector, jurisdiction and remoteness, comparisons with learning goals, and tracking of whether investment is closing or widening them.

2. Supporting rising student need, health & wellbeing

How well do public school facilities support inclusion, student wellbeing and individualised learning? What improvements are needed?

What types of learning spaces are required for the future to help public schools accommodate increased student complexity and diversity of learning styles?

What types of learning spaces are required to help schools meet the needs of students with disability?

Amidst the growing complexity of student needs, including mental health challenges, disability and learning difficulties, school libraries and teacher librarians are central to a whole-of-school response to these challenges.

School libraries are known safe, inclusive and welcoming spaces where students can pursue interests, access support, and engage with learning beyond the formal curriculum. Studies show they are central to student wellbeing, fostering belonging and providing sanctuary, a space to relax and recharge.¹³ Teacher librarians play a crucial role in identifying students who are disengaged or struggling and connecting them with 'just the right book at just the right time', building the intrinsic motivation and sense of belonging that are prerequisites for wellbeing and school completion.

¹³ Merga, M. K. (2021). Libraries as Wellbeing Supportive Spaces in Contemporary Schools. *Journal of Library Administration*, 61(6), 659–675. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2021.1947056>; See also Emma Wallace, [View of The school library as sanctuary: Supporting students social and emotional well-being | Synergy](#) and Danielle Raffaele, [Cultivating the 'Third Place' in school libraries to support student wellbeing](#), School Library Association of Victoria

The most significant improvement needed is wider recognition of the fundamental role that school libraries play in student wellbeing and learning. However, second to this is improved recognition of the library itself as a flexible, multi-use learning space, and corresponding resourcing. This means library areas large and adaptable enough to support small-group withdrawal, quiet individual retreat and whole-class teaching within the same footprint; furniture and layouts that can be reconfigured for different uses across a school day; and the staffing to make that flexibility work in practice.

Where libraries are too small, too noisy, or unstaffed, schools lose one of their few genuinely multi-purpose spaces and must find this capacity elsewhere, usually at greater capital cost. For students with disability and those experiencing learning difficulty, the school library can also serve as the kind of low-sensory, quiet retreat space identified in the Inquiry whitepaper, provided it is designed and staffed with that purpose in mind rather than treated as incidental.

3. Equity gaps in access to quality facilities

How do differences in school infrastructure contribute to inequities in learning, wellbeing and participation?

How can we ensure that the physical environments of public schools are inclusive and culturally safe for Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities?

What are the unique infrastructure challenges experienced by regional and remote public schools?

A well-resourced school library, run by a qualified teacher librarian, is one of the most effective equity levers available to a school. For students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, regional and remote communities, and other disadvantaged cohorts, a school library may be their only access to books, digital resources, and support for independent learning. When students are denied access to a functioning school library, educational inequity deepens.

ALIA's experience indicates that access to a school library is largely dependent on the school system (Catholic, Independent or government) and the individual school principal exercising their discretion over budget allocation. Wealthier Independent and Catholic schools are able to support well-resourced, often multi-campus school libraries and employ teams of qualified staff. Government schools, meanwhile, increasingly lack even a basic library. This inequity is visible in the 2025 Australian School Library Survey, which found that more than half of government school respondents had an annual budget of less than \$7500, while the equivalent percentage of Independent and Catholic schools had a budget of \$10,000 or more.¹⁴ Similarly, Independent and Catholic school libraries reported much higher staffing levels (2.6 FTE and 2.0 FTE on average respectively) compared to government schools (1.4 FTE).¹⁵

¹⁴ Table 4.3 - [2025 Softlink Australia School Library Survey Report.pdf](#)

¹⁵ Tables 11.2, 12.2 and 13.2 - [2025 Softlink Australia School Library Survey Report.pdf](#)

Cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students requires school libraries that hold and make visible First Nations knowledge, stories and perspectives, including community-endorsed local content, and that are staffed by professionals trained to select, contextualise and teach with these collections respectfully. A library that is well-stocked but disconnected from local community knowledge, or that is unstaffed and therefore unable to curate culturally appropriate collections, cannot fulfil this role. ACSL supports embedding cultural safety requirements for library collections and programs within any national infrastructure standard, developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Regional and remote public schools face distinct school library challenges that compound their broader infrastructure disadvantage. These schools are least able to attract and retain qualified teacher librarians, and find it harder to access professional relief and support when staff are absent or unavailable. They also often serve as a community's only accessible library, extending the resourcing burden beyond the student population to the wider town. Freight costs and delivery times for physical collections are higher, and reliable digital infrastructure to support remote and online library services is frequently absent. National data collection, as recommended above, is essential to identifying and targeting these challenges, since they are currently invisible in any systematic way.

4. Ageing school infrastructure & underinvestment

What impact do ageing or outdated classrooms and learning environments have on student engagement, wellbeing and achievement?

What evidence or examples are there for how physical school environments positively or negatively impact staff effectiveness, motivation, wellbeing, engagement, job satisfaction and retention?

Are there examples of where school infrastructure upgrades have had a tangible positive impact on student engagement, motivation and achievement?

In an era of acute teacher shortage, removing school library staff, or failing to resource them adequately, increases pressure on already stretched classroom educators. Conversely, investing in qualified school library staff is an investment in the sustainability and capacity of the whole school workforce.

Teacher librarians reduce the workload of classroom teachers by leading whole-of-school literacy programs, curating curriculum resources, and supporting the integration of digital and information literacy across learning areas.

On staff retention specifically, the international SLIDE research cited above found that school and district leaders consistently identify budget pressure, not lack of evidence or educational value, as the reason school librarian positions are cut, and that the loss of these positions increases the burden carried by classroom teachers and principals.¹⁶ ACSL's own engagement with the profession reflects the same pattern in Australia: where a school library

¹⁶ Debra E Kachel, [Perspectives on School Librarian Employment in the United States, 2009-10 to 2018-19](#), July 2021

is reduced to an unstaffed room, classroom teachers report having to absorb tasks the teacher librarian previously carried, such as resourcing units of work and supporting struggling readers, on top of an already full teaching load. This contributes to the broader retention pressures facing the public school workforce.

On tangible examples of positive impact, the South Australian school library census data cited earlier provides a useful natural example in reverse: as the proportion of South Australian schools with a qualified teacher librarian fell from 23 per cent in 2019 to 15 per cent in 2024, schools and teachers reported a corresponding loss of whole-of-school reading culture, curriculum support and a safe, supervised space for students.¹⁷

ACSL submits that restoring qualified staffing, rather than only refurbishing the physical space, is the upgrade most likely to produce a measurable improvement in student engagement and achievement, and recommends the Inquiry treat staffing as infrastructure investment in its own right when assessing the impact of upgrades.

5. Preparing every child for a rapidly changing world

What are the priority infrastructure investments needed to ensure that public schools can prepare students for positive post school transitions to employment or study?

How can the infrastructure and equipment required to offer a full curriculum, including a full range of academic and vocational pathways be made accessible to all students?

As the Inquiry discussion paper says, at a time in history where technology is developing at a pace beyond our ability to keep up, ensuring students have the skills, knowledge and capability to navigate a changing world is critical. This includes critical and creative thinking, problem solving, collaboration and teamwork – all skills taught as a core part of school library services.

School libraries are the primary setting in which the next generation receives training on information literacy (including digital, artificial intelligence and media literacy), equipping Australia's children with the skills they need to navigate the digital future. Qualified school library staff, in particular teacher librarians, are expert in supporting information literacy and can guide students with critical study and research strategies. The library is the primary environment in which students are training in information identification and verification, increasingly including media literacy and the ability to recognise and combat mis- and dis-information.¹⁸ In fact, teacher-librarians receive direct instruction in delivering digital literacy training as part of their qualifications, and the Australian school library community maintains professional development standards to ensure they are capable of leading a digitally literate school community.¹⁹

¹⁷ Dix, Katherine L ; Van Der Zant, Tamara. (2025) School Libraries in South Australia: 2024 Census Australian Council for Educational Research, 2025

¹⁸ Libraries across Australia are leading media literacy training. See, for example, programs such as [The Matter of Facts National Library Workshops - Media Literacy](#) and [Media Literacy with the University of Canberra](#)

¹⁹ Australian Library and Information Association and Australian Coalition for School Libraries (2024) [ALIA ACSL Statement on School Libraries and Digital Literacy.pdf](#)

The importance of school libraries to a complete modern education will only increase in the future, in line with the increase in digital and media literacy needs of workplaces, and life.

6. A lack of national coordination & funding

What are the consequences of having no national strategy or funding for public school infrastructure?

Is there value in Australia having a national agreement for school infrastructure similar to the Better and Fairer School Agreement that exists for recurrent funding? What aims and targets should that agreement include?

While the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025–2034) establishes a joint commitment of the Commonwealth, states and territories to putting every public school on a path to 100% of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), the Agreement does not explicitly mention school libraries as a component of school infrastructure or of the reforms required. ACSL urges the Schools for Our Future Inquiry to make this connection explicit in its recommendations, so that school library infrastructure is understood as integral to, not separate from, the realisation of the Agreement's ambitions.

ACSL strongly supports a dedicated national school infrastructure agreement, modelled on the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, to fill the current gap in capital funding and coordination. Such an agreement should include explicit targets that:

- every public school student has access to a fit-for-purpose library space staffed by a qualified library professional within a defined timeframe
- library infrastructure is reported against the national data standard recommended above as a condition of funding
- capital allocations are weighted to direct proportionally greater investment to schools serving disadvantaged, regional and remote communities, consistent with the equity objectives of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement
- progress against these targets is reviewed publicly on a regular cycle, so that school libraries cannot again disappear from national accountability as they have over the recent decades.

7. A changing role for public schools

How are the roles that schools are being asked to play in local communities changing, and how is the potential benefit changing roles influenced by current school infrastructure?

What are the infrastructure requirements needed to support the implementation of full service school models and the Thriving Kids initiative?

Over the past decades, public libraries have evolved from quiet book-lending repositories into dynamic community hubs and essential civic infrastructure. They now function as safe

havens, digital inclusion centres, and collaborative spaces, addressing modern social and economic needs while expanding their services well beyond traditional print media.²⁰

With public schools now taking on a similar role for the wider community and wellbeing role under models such as Thriving Kids being implemented nationwide, school libraries are best placed to draw on the experience of the public libraries as they provide some of the flexible space and expertise this expansion requires.²¹ They also provide important alternative and low sensory spaces for students, particularly in schools that do not have dedicated facilities for children with additional needs.

But these benefits only exist where they are adequately sized and staffed to begin with. A library that is already overcrowded or understaffed cannot also absorb allied health consultations, small-group therapy sessions, or before- and after-school community use. ACSL recommends that any infrastructure planning for full service schools and Thriving Kids explicitly assess existing library capacity and staffing as part of the site readiness process, rather than treating the library as incidental, residual space that can simply be repurposed without additional investment.

8. Climate change & environmental resilience

What upgrades, technologies and design approaches are needed to improve energy efficiency in public schools across the nation and how should these be funded?

How prepared are schools to withstand the impacts of climate change and what standards, monitoring and investments are required to ensure an effective approach, particularly in high risk communities

As one of the few communal indoor spaces in many schools, libraries already play a central role as a refuge from extreme heat, and should be a priority for climate resilience upgrades such as efficient cooling, insulation and shading. ACSL recommends that any national standard for monitoring school climate readiness include the adequacy of library and other communal indoor spaces as a specific measure, and that capital investment programs for climate resilience explicitly recognise libraries as eligible, priority infrastructure rather than leaving their upgrade to incidental maintenance budgets.

Conclusion

The Schools for Our Future Inquiry represents a landmark opportunity to address decades of underinvestment in public school infrastructure. ACSL urges the Inquiry to look beyond classrooms and corridors to recognise that school libraries - their spaces, their collections, and the qualified professionals who staff them - are foundational to the kind of future-ready, equitable and excellent public schooling that all Australian children deserve.

The clear correlation between qualified school library staff, well-funded school libraries and positive student learning outcomes demonstrates how an investment in

²⁰ See, for example, Lucy Sweeney, [Libraries are becoming 'community living rooms' keeping regional Australians connected - ABC News](#), 31 May 2025

²¹ See

school libraries is one of the best investments in public education that the Australian Government could make.

ACSL would welcome the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Inquiry and to discuss practical pathways to a national commitment for every Australian student to have access to a well-resourced school library, staffed by qualified library professionals.