

## THE IMPACT OF GREAT SCHOOL LIBRARIES REPORT 2016

How can we teach students the reading, digital literacy, critical thinking and research skills they need to succeed in this increasingly online world? By ensuring every student in Australia has access to a well-resourced school library and the expertise of a teacher librarian.

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### Context

In October 2015, FAIR (**F**reedom of **A**ccess to **I**nformation and **R**esources) joined with the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), ALIA Schools, Australian School Library Association (ASLA), Queensland School Library Association, School Library Association of NSW, School Library Association of South Australia, School Library Association of Victoria and the Western Australian School Library Association to seek nominations of Great School Libraries across the nation.

We were looking for libraries that help children and young people find reliable information; use the information effectively; think critically; make informed decisions; work productively with others; build knowledge and understanding of the world; safely navigate the internet; communicate and share their ideas; and find great reads to meet personal interests and abilities.

Nearly 600 students, teachers, parents, principals, library staff and other members of the community nominated their school libraries and told us why they deserved the accolade of being named a Great School Library.

The campaign provided us with many different answers to the question 'what do school libraries do'. This report complements those findings by explaining why school libraries are so important to students' success and proposing steps for ensuring they continue to make a vital contribution.

## **School libraries help achieve the best outcomes for students**

School libraries are vibrant places with many different programs and services, described in the Great School Libraries report<sup>1</sup>. While it is tempting to list the many and varied contributions of school libraries, including curriculum support, classroom resources and professional development for teachers and the introduction of innovative elements such as makerspaces, the primary drivers for school library activities are:

### **Reading**

Giving every child a reading start and keeping them reading through their teenage years.

### **Digital literacy**

Making sure students are confident and safe users of the latest technology, media and applications.

### **Critical thinking and research**

Ensuring students understand how to access information and critically assess its rigour, quality and relevance. Helping students improve their school performance and preparing them for further education.

## **The need for increased focus on school libraries**

These three drivers represent vital elements of a student's educational experience. They are building blocks for learning and underpin every aspect of the Australian Curriculum. However, Australia has a long way to go to ensure that all students benefit from these skills.

### **Reading**

The Australian Early Development Census 2015 results<sup>2</sup> show that 15.4% of five year olds in Australia are developmentally vulnerable or at risk in the language and cognitive skills domain. In the most disadvantaged areas of the country, this increases to 25.3%, compared with 11.8% in the least disadvantaged areas.

The 2013 report on *School libraries, teacher-librarians and their contribution to student literacy development in Gold Coast schools*<sup>3</sup> found that for Queensland schools with a qualified teacher librarian, 50% had NAPLAN scores higher than the NAPLAN national mean scores for reading and writing for the corresponding year group. At schools without a qualified teacher librarian, NAPLAN scores were consistently below the national mean score for NAPLAN reading and writing.

### **Digital literacy**

The *National Assessment Program – ICT Literacy Report 2014*<sup>4</sup> found that 45% of Year 6 students failed to reach the proficient standard and 48% of Year 10 students. This was

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedc-national-report>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/national-report-2012>

<sup>3</sup> <http://eprints.gut.edu.au/60260/38/60260b.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nap.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/D15\\_8761\\_NAP-ICT\\_2014\\_Public\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.nap.edu.au/verve/_resources/D15_8761_NAP-ICT_2014_Public_Report_Final.pdf)

a drop in performance compared with the 2011 of 22 scale points for Year 6 students and 39 scale points for Year 10 students.

Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority CEO Robert Randall was quoted as saying, "The decline of these results is of concern ... You can't just assume that just because kids are using devices that they are learning these more sophisticated skills. Those skills have to be taught, they are not just caught."<sup>5</sup>

### **Critical thinking and research skills**

The internet has introduced a new paradigm in terms of critical thinking and research, which has had an impact on students worldwide.

Quoting from the Pew Research Center 2012 report on *How teens do research in the digital world*<sup>6</sup>, "Overall, teachers who participated in this study characterize the impact of today's digital environment on their students' research habits and skills as mostly positive, yet multi-faceted and not without drawbacks. Among the more positive impacts they see: the best students access a greater depth and breadth of information on topics that interest them; students can take advantage of the availability of educational material in engaging multimedia formats; and many become more self-reliant researchers.

"At the same time, these teachers juxtapose these benefits against some emerging concerns. Specifically, some teachers worry about students' overdependence on search engines; the difficulty many students have judging the quality of online information; the general level of literacy of today's students; increasing distractions pulling at students and poor time management skills; students' potentially diminished critical thinking capacity; and the ease with which today's students can borrow from the work of others.

"These teachers report that students rely mainly on search engines to conduct research, in lieu of other resources such as online databases, the news sites of respected news organizations, printed books, or reference librarians."

School libraries are best placed to help instil these skills.

Dr Michael Phillips, lecturer in digital technologies in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, wrote, "One of the challenges for 'general capabilities' such as ICT is that all teachers in all subject areas are supposed to contribute to student knowledge and skill development. While this is a laudable objective, it does mean that the responsibility for teaching these digital literacy skills does not reside with an easily identifiable teacher or group of teachers as is the case for mathematics, English or science."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 'IT crisis looms as computer literacy plummets in Australian schools', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 2015

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media//Files/Reports/2012/PIP\\_TeacherSurveyReportWithMethodology110112.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media//Files/Reports/2012/PIP_TeacherSurveyReportWithMethodology110112.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> 'Helping students bridge digital literacy gap will be no quick fix', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 2015

Further investment in school libraries and qualified teacher librarians is essential if Australian students are to fulfil their potential and if future generations are to succeed in the global knowledge economy.

## **The international experience**

While recent research on the impact of Australian school libraries is thin on the ground, there has been extensive research on the effectiveness of school libraries overseas, and especially in the US<sup>8</sup>. The environment in America is similar to that of Australia, "Information literacy has never been more important than it is today, yet resources and support for the programs and people who are best-suited to teach and facilitate information literacy has dwindled in too many schools and districts across the nation. Even as the demand for accountability grows and mounting evidence continues to affirm that school libraries staffed by certified school librarians make a measurable difference on student achievement, library resources are too-often reduced or eliminated from budgets altogether."

### **Reading**

Analysis of US National Center for Education Statistics and National Assessment of Education Progress reading scores revealed that schools in states that gained librarians between 2005 and 2009 had significantly higher increases in fourth-grade reading scores than schools in states that lost librarians. While Colorado schools research in 2012 showed that schools with at least one full-time equivalent (FTE) endorsed librarian averaged significantly higher advanced reading scores and significantly lower unsatisfactory scores than schools without an FTE librarian.<sup>9</sup>

### **Digital literacy**

A Finnish study of 13 to 20-year-olds suggests confirms what many teachers around the world suspect – that while teenagers are adept at using devices for gaming, social media, music and film, this does not translate into students who are adept at using new technology for formal learning. Early results from the RoSA research project show a lack of skills in information-seeking and the use of basic programs such as spreadsheets.<sup>10</sup>

### **Critical thinking and research skills**

Statistics from the Scholastic Publishing report<sup>11</sup> noted that 75% of students have no idea how to locate articles and resources they need for their research; 60% don't verify the accuracy or reliability of the information they find and 44% do not know how to integrate knowledge from different sources. However, a South Carolina study in 2013-2014 showed that students in schools with a full-time librarian and an assistant

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<sup>8</sup> School Libraries Work! A Compendium of Research Supporting the Effectiveness of School Libraries, Scholastic Library Publishing, 2016 <http://www.scholastic.com/slw2016/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> <http://rosa.utu.fi/themes/project/27/>

<sup>11</sup> School Libraries Work! A Compendium of Research Supporting the Effectiveness of School Libraries, Scholastic Library Publishing, 2016 <http://www.scholastic.com/slw2016/>

were nearly 10% more likely to do well in the English Language Arts (ELA) informational text and research domains and less likely not to meet the ELA standards.

## **Great Australian School Libraries rely on qualified library professionals**

Research confirms that for a school library to perform at its peak, qualified library staff must be employed. It is no surprise that in the 2015 Australia-wide search to identify Great School Libraries, more than 90% of the nominations were for school libraries employing a teacher librarian.

Analysis carried out by the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER)<sup>12</sup> shows that the students who most need teacher librarians are the least well served, "Between 2010 and 2013 there is evidence of a greater number of teachers in library roles in high socio-economic (SES) schools and correspondingly fewer in low SES schools."

In addition, the ACER findings suggested that fewer early career teachers are entering library roles in schools and more than a third of primary teachers and a quarter of secondary teachers in a library role had not undertaken any tertiary study in library and information science.

The 2016 ACER report, *What the staff in Australia's schools surveys tell us about teachers working in school libraries*, indicated that in 2013 4-5% of primary teachers and 2-3% of secondary teachers were working in a library role (although the primary teachers were not necessarily library specialists). This 2-3% compared with 5% of secondary teachers involved in LOTE, 5% computing and 6% special needs.

From these statistics, it is clear that there needs to be a significantly increased emphasis on attracting, training and employing qualified teacher librarians in primary and secondary schools if the desired student outcomes are to be achieved.

## **Attracting, training and employing qualified teacher librarians**

We can teach students the reading, digital literacy, critical thinking and research skills they need to succeed in this increasingly online world by ensuring that every student in Australia has access to a well-resourced school library and the expertise of a teacher librarian. However, achieving this goal will require the combined commitment of a number of stakeholders, including enablers, influencers, policy- and decision-makers.

## **Library and information sector – modelling excellence, advocacy and career opportunities**

At a local level, teacher librarians can model excellence. School library associations have carried out extensive work mapping the teacher librarian role to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Australian Professional Standards for Teachers<sup>13,14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> [http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=tll\\_misc](http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=tll_misc)

<sup>13</sup> Teacher Librarian Practice for the Australian Professional Standards, ALIA, 2014  
<https://www.alia.org.au/groups/alia-schools>

<sup>14</sup> Evidence guides for teacher librarians, ASLA, 2014 <http://www.asla.org.au/publications/evidence-guides.aspx>

There is also a structured program of ongoing professional development available through the ALIA PD Scheme, leading to specialist Certified Professional status<sup>15</sup>.

By modelling excellence, teacher librarians provide evidence of the value of employing qualified professionals in school libraries to students, teachers, principals, parents and the wider community.

At a state, territory and national level, school library associations need to work together to advocate for the importance of employing qualified professionals – maintaining existing positions and creating new job opportunities – and to promote the role of teacher librarian to young people, those seeking a midlife career change, undergraduates and early career teachers – ensuring that these new jobs can be filled.

Continued monitoring of the environment for school libraries and teacher librarians, for example through Softlink's School Library Survey<sup>16</sup> and ACER insights<sup>17</sup>, will provide valuable data to underpin advocacy initiatives.

### **Higher educators – training future teacher librarians**

As the professional body for the library and information sector, ALIA accredits teacher librarian courses in Australian universities. These institutions need commitment from governments and support from the sector in order to recruit more students and ensure that their courses continue to reflect global best practice in teacher librarianship.

### **Allied professionals – statements of support**

Statements of support for the role of school libraries and teacher librarians from fellow teaching professionals would greatly assist with advocacy. In the Great School Libraries 2015 campaign, 30% of the nominations came from teachers, demonstrating the peer-to-peer support for the role of school libraries and library professionals. School library associations can seek position statements from other teaching groups, including literacy educators.

### **Governments – acknowledgement and framework for development**

Federal, State and Territory Governments' acknowledgement of the vital role of school libraries in supporting reading, digital literacy, critical thinking and research skills, together with a strong recommendation from Education Ministers about the employment of teacher librarians and qualified library staff in schools within their jurisdiction, would be a significant step forward. Further, it would be of benefit to look for innovative ways of providing access to teacher librarians where there is not the critical mass to support a full-time appointment and to incentivise principals to employ teacher librarians where there is a large student body.

The goal should be for students in every Australian school to have access to a teacher librarian.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://membership.alia.org.au/pdinfo/specialisations/schools-specialisation>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.softlinkint.com/apac/schools>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.acer.edu.au/publications-and-resources/library-and-information-resources>

## **Principals and the school community – employment, funding**

Formal acknowledgement of the value of school libraries and teacher librarians from principals' associations and parent groups would be welcomed. With so many pressures on school funding, it is no wonder that school communities are looking for ways to cut back. However, reducing staffing levels in school libraries is a false economy and could seriously impact student outcomes. Gaining formal endorsement of the return on investment of a well-resourced, well-staffed school library would add to the body of evidence described in this report.

## **Further information**

This report has been authored by FAIR (**F**reedom of **A**ccess to **I**nformation and **R**esources) on behalf of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), ALIA Schools, Australian School Library Association (ASLA), Queensland School Library Association, School Library Association of NSW, School Library Association of South Australia, School Library Association of Victoria and the Western Australian School Library Association.

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