



2023/2024 Budget submission

March 2023

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ACT Alliance for Evidence-Based Education

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1. About the ACT Alliance for Evidence-Based Education

The ACT Alliance for Evidence-Based Education is a group of concerned parents, teachers, academics, speech pathologists and researchers who have come together to work with the ACT Government to improve the literacy outcomes of students in ACT schools.

2. Summary of Budget proposals

The 2023-24 Budget must include an education reform package that fully funds the following measures to support the proper implementation of the new Australian Curriculum V 9.0.

1. Establish a literacy taskforce headed by a Chief Literacy Officer (with extensive knowledge of literacy instruction informed by the science of reading and learning) overseeing a team of literacy coaches to provide training for teachers in the explicit and systematic instruction of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
2. Mandate a universal Year 1 phonics screening check, with relief time for teachers to conduct the checks, analyse the results and implement appropriate targeted support for students.
3. Provide decodable readers for students in Kindergarten and Year 1.

This reform package should only require modest funding with a one-off procurement of around \$500,000 for decodable readers and annual funding of around \$1.5 million for the remainder of the measures (based on Budget measures implemented by South Australia and New South Wales).

3. Policy context

There are a number of red flags which indicate the need for urgent action by the ACT.

- NAPLAN results show ACT students are failing to meet their potential. Disadvantaged children in the ACT perform worse than disadvantaged children in other parts of the country. Advantaged children in the ACT perform worse than advantaged children in the rest of Australia. The results are consistently poor across primary schools and high schools and can be seen in NAPLAN results for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.
- The percentage of students in the ACT with low literacy grows rather than shrinks as students progress from primary school to high school.
- Outcomes for Indigenous students are significantly worse than for non-Indigenous students. The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students increases the longer students remain in school in the ACT.
- The ACT is one of three jurisdictions identifying a significantly smaller proportion of students as requiring cognitive assistance than the national average. This under-identification of children means the ACT is receiving less funding from the Australian Government to support children with cognitive difficulties.

In addition, it appears that the ACT is not fully utilising evidence-based best practice tools for reading instruction.

- The ACT is one of the last three jurisdictions yet to mandate the use of a phonics screening tool for early identification of children at risk of being struggling readers.

- ACT schools don't have the resources required to implement the new Curriculum as they rely on predictive readers which teach children to guess words rather than use letter-sound relationship strategies.

Three years ago, the ACT committed to the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* and to providing young Canberrans with access to high-quality education. The data clearly shows a systematic failure to achieve this ambition. Notwithstanding the implementation of the Early Years Literacy Initiative by the ACT Education Directorate over the past five years, it appears ACT public schools are not implementing best-practice approaches to teaching literacy. As a result, ACT students are not reaching their potential and the consequences are particularly dire for Aboriginal students and children with cognitive difficulties.

4. An education reform package should establish a literacy taskforce

At first glance, the ACT tops the nation in NAPLAN in most subjects and age groups. But when ACT children are compared on a like-for-like basis with students with similar parental occupations and education, the ACT's results show students fall well below their peers in other jurisdictions. Numerous reports over the past eight years have suggested the ACT education system is failing children including from the ACT Auditor General; Professor Stephen Lamb of Victoria University who was commissioned by the ACT Education Directorate; Australian National University; and Grattan Institute.ⁱ

We note the ACT has questioned the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) used for NAPLAN and that a report is being prepared on this for the National Council of Education Ministers.ⁱⁱ Pending the outcomes of that report it would appear the ACT's results are so poor that even if they were discounted, they would still be deeply concerning.

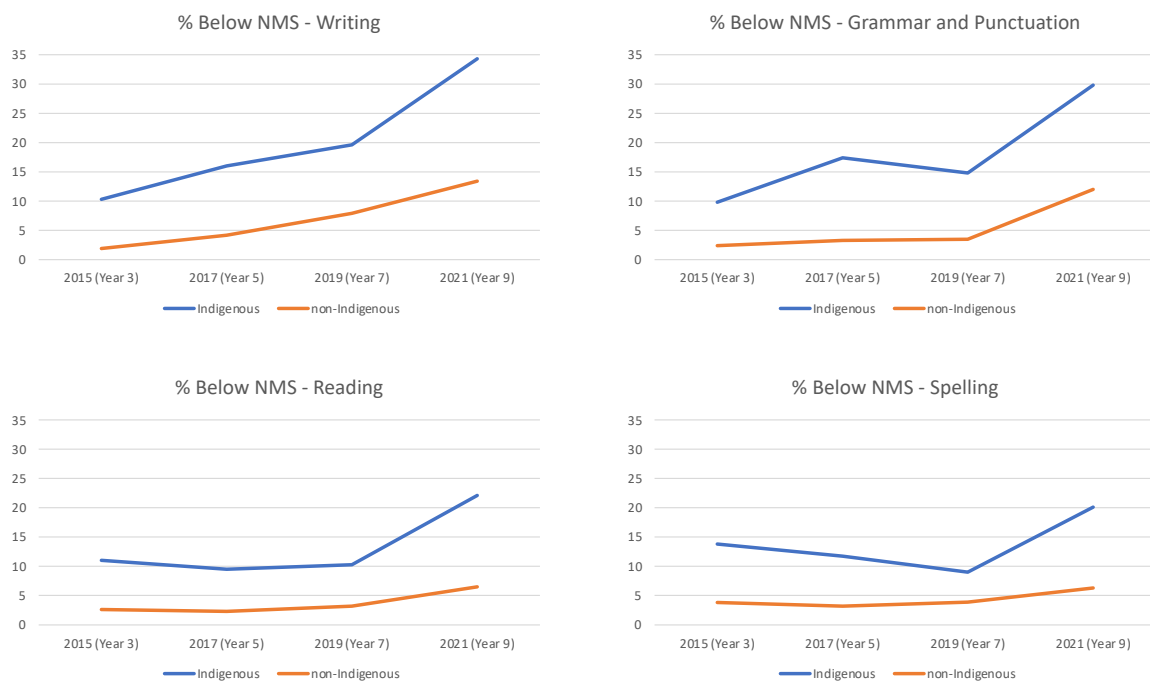
The data shows the number of students in the ACT with low literacy is growing rather than shrinking as students progress from primary school to high school.

In 2015, 1.9 per cent of non-Indigenous Year 3 ACT students (with an average age of 8 years and 7 months) were below the National Minimum Standards for writing in NAPLAN. Six years later in 2021, now 14 years and 7 months old and in Grade 9, amongst this same cohort of students the percentage of students not meeting the National Minimum Standards for writing grew to 13.4 per cent.

The outcomes for Indigenous students are significantly worse. In 2015, 10.3 per cent of Year 3 Indigenous ACT students were below the National Minimum Standards for writing in NAPLAN. Six years later and now in Grade 9, amongst this same cohort of Indigenous students, the percentage not meeting the National Minimum Standards for writing grew to a staggering 34.3 per cent. Despite the relative socio-economic advantage of the ACT, and the small number of Indigenous students, these results mean that one in three Indigenous students in Grade 9 has writing abilities below the National Minimum Standards.

The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students increases the longer students remain in school in the ACT and this trend plays out across writing, grammar and punctuation, reading and spelling.

Percentage of ACT students not meeting National Minimum Standards (NMS)



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)

There has been a lot of research in Australia and internationally over the past forty years about effective literacy instruction. It is well known that reading failure can be prevented in all but a small percentage of children with serious learning disorders. Most children will learn to read if they are taught using a direct, explicit, and systematic approach. This is not the approach being taken in ACT classrooms and this is limiting the potential of the vast majority of children and catastrophically failing Indigenous students.

The ACT should follow South Australia's lead – as set out below – and establish a literacy taskforce to lift literacy outcomes for all students. The taskforce should include a team of literacy coaches to provide training for teachers in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The team should include psychologists, speech-language pathologists and teachers who are trained in evidence-based programs that have been scientifically proven to improve literacy outcomes. We suggest appointing a Chief Literacy Officer to oversee the Taskforce who is a well-regarded academic or highly qualified teacher with training in evidence-based approaches in structured literacy and change management.

5. An education reform package should provide funding for universal phonics screening

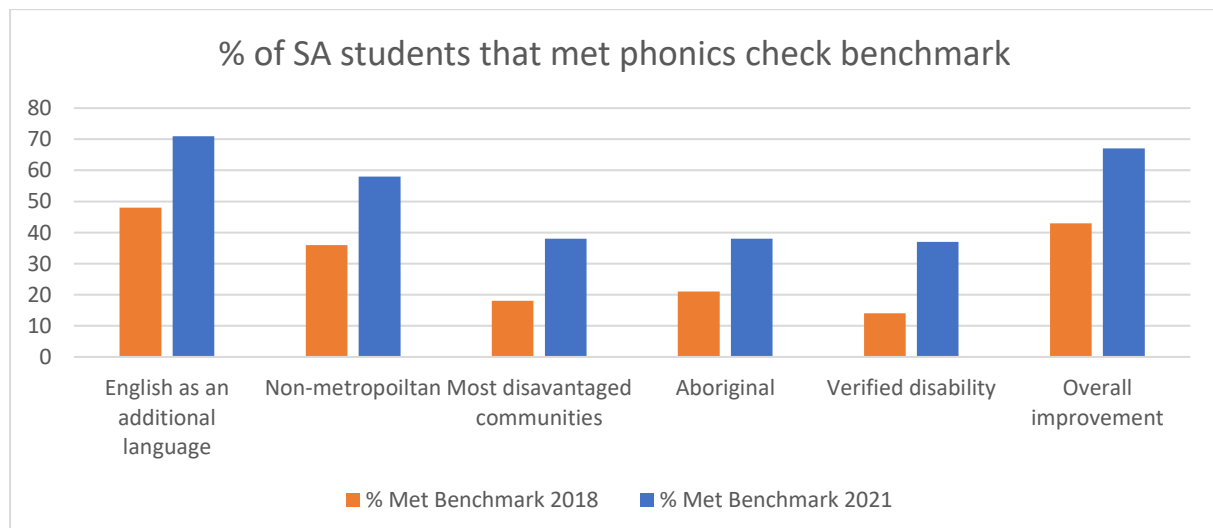
The ACT is one of the last three jurisdictions that is yet to mandate the use of a universal phonics screening tool for students in Year 1. A phonics check was rolled out in South Australia in 2018, in Tasmania and New South Wales in 2021, and will commence in Victoria and Western Australia in 2023. The ACT Catholic education group of schools has had a phonics screening check for the past two years. This simple cost-effective tool could change the trajectory of educational outcomes for children whose literacy difficulties are going undetected in the ACT.

The good news is that there is proven good practice from other jurisdictions that can be applied in the ACT. South Australia may be the most effective jurisdiction for identifying those children at risk of not reaching grade-level literacy standards and employing evidence-based classroom practices that will support them to progress.

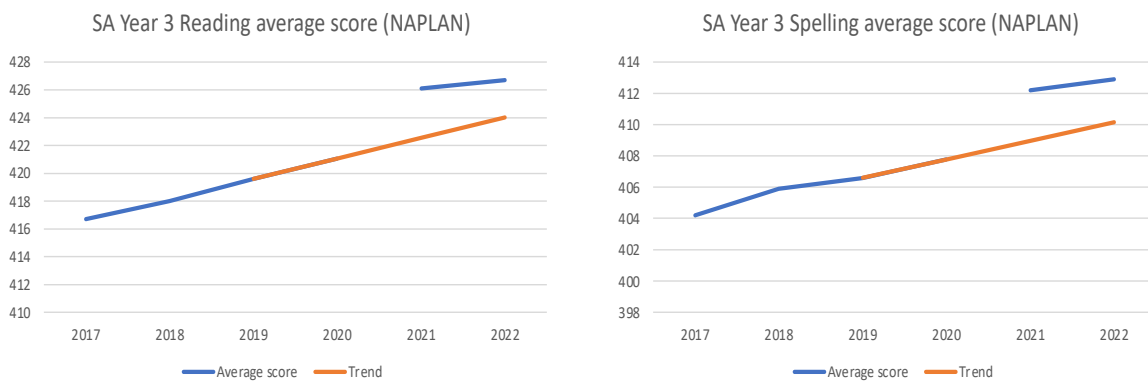
The South Australian Literacy Guarantee provided \$20.9 million over four years from 2018-19 to implement a comprehensive program to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for all South Australian students. Initiatives under the Literacy Guarantee program include:

- literacy coaches with experience in phonics
- phonics check for all year one students
- free dyslexia workshops for parents
- parental engagement resources for schools and families
- working with non-government organisations to deliver evidence-based literacy and numeracy programs for disadvantaged children in their early years before they begin school
- reviewing how South Australian Certified Education exams are conducted for students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties,
- Learning Guarantee conferences providing professional development opportunities for teachers,
- from 1 January 2019, all graduating Initial Teacher Education students have to had passed a Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education.

The 2021 South Australian Phonics Screening Check results show state-wide improvement in the ability of year 1 students to decode and blend letters into words. In 2021, 67 per cent met the expected achievement level for the check. This is a remarkable improvement of 24 percentage points from 2018 when only 43 per cent of students met the benchmark. There were improvements for all disadvantaged populations including students with English as an additional language, students from non-metropolitan schools and the most disadvantaged communities, Aboriginal students, and students with a verified disability.



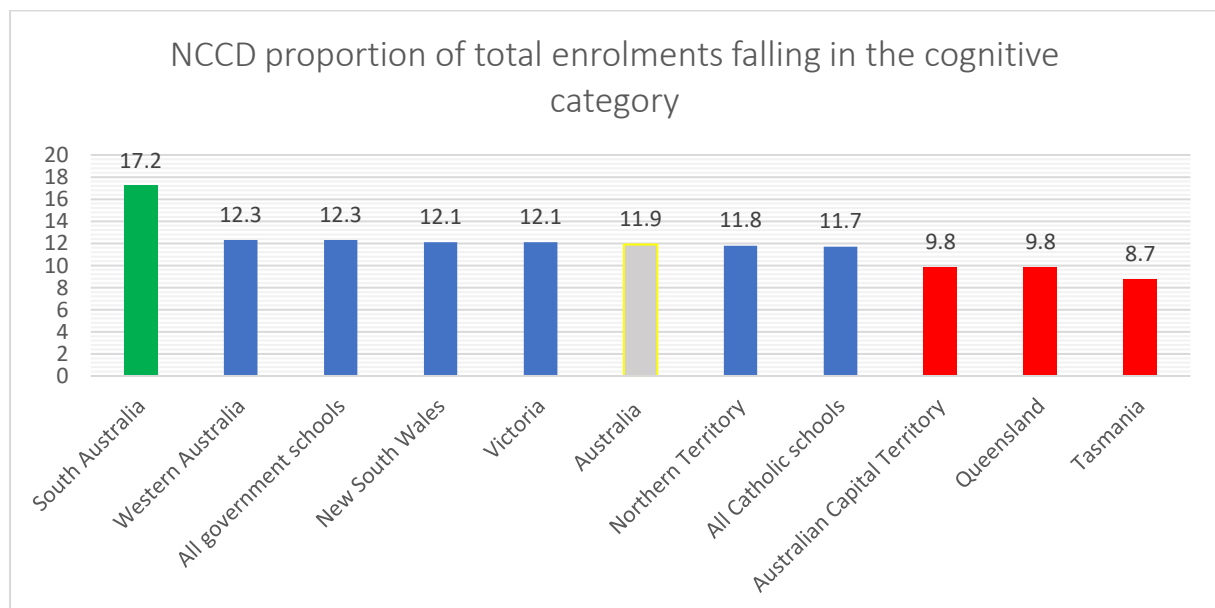
South Australian NAPLAN results for Year 3 Reading confirm there have been above-trend improvements in reading and spelling following the introduction of the Literacy Guarantee Initiatives. (NAPLAN testing was suspended in 2020).



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)

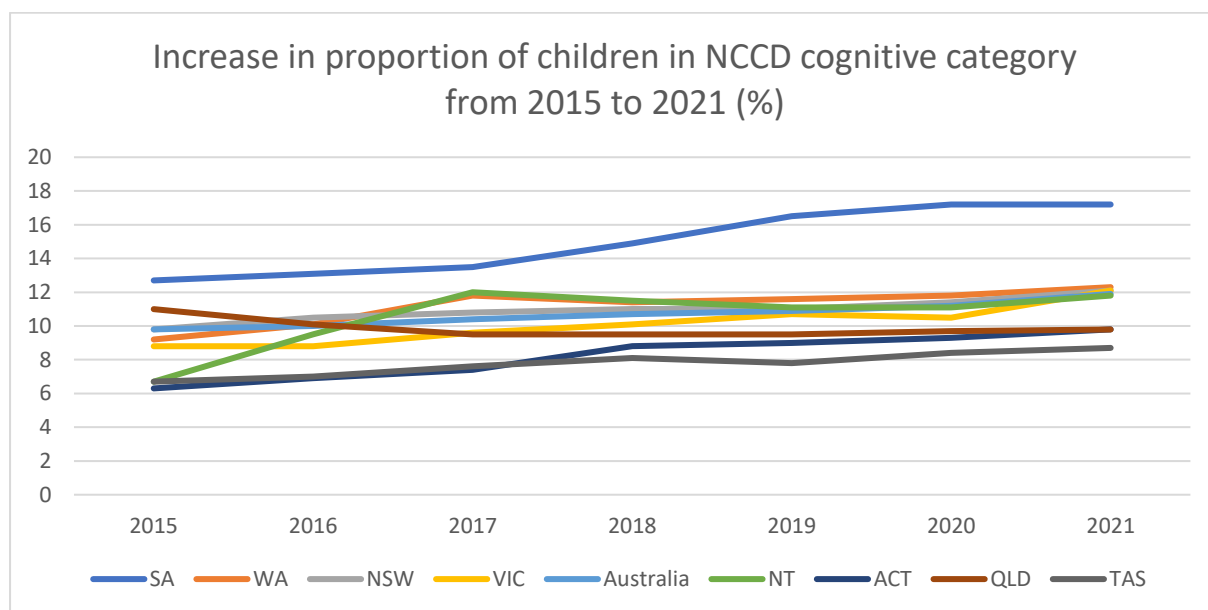
The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) is an annual collection of information about Australian school students with disability. The NCCD enables governments to understand the needs of students with disability and how they can be best supported at school. There are four categories of disability: physical; cognitive; sensory; and social/emotional. The cognitive category includes total or partial loss of the person's bodily or mental functions; and a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction. Specific learning disorders like dyslexia fall within the cognitive category.

Analysis of NCCD indicates the average proportion of students across Australia falling into the NCCD cognitive category in 2021 as a percentage of total enrolments is 11.9 per cent. The ACT is well below the national average. Apart from anything else, this under-identification of children with learning disorders means that the ACT is receiving less funding from the Commonwealth to support children with cognitive difficulties.



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) National Report on Schooling in Australia data portal, School Students with Disability

South Australia is significantly higher than the national average at 17.2 per cent (5.3 percentage points higher). Examination of the trends since 2015 indicates South Australia had a 4.5 percentage point increase in the six-year period from 2015 to 2021, compared to the national average increase of 2.1 percentage points. While the ACT has also seen an increased number of children falling within this category, it remains below the average.



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) National Report on Schooling in Australia data portal, School Students with Disability

Around 20 per cent of the ACT student population is likely to have reading difficulties. There were around 4,090 children enrolled in kindergarten in ACT public schools in 2021 – more than 800 of these children will have reading difficulties that could have been picked up through a phonics screening check. Let’s not let another year go by that allows these children to fall through the cracks, while their friends living just over the border in NSW get the early identification and support they require to learn to read.

Another 800 children started kindergarten in 2023 who won’t reach their full potential. Those children who come from more advantaged backgrounds will spend the next few years getting their hearing checked, their eyes checked, and being taken to occupational therapists and speech pathologists. By the time they know they need remedial intervention they will be around 10 years old. The paradox is that a discrepancy exists between the time when a parent realises their child is not reaching grade-level standards (often after seeing their Year 3 NAPLAN results) and the window for the most effective intervention (kindergarten or first grade). Many struggling readers in the ACT are never diagnosed because teachers do not have the tools or critically, the foundational training required to identify struggling readers and to understand why they are struggling.

ACT schools urgently require funding to support universal phonics screening for all students in the foundational grades, with relief time for teachers to conduct the checks, analyse the results and implement targeted support for students.

6. An education reform package should purchase decodable readers

The new Curriculum will require a shift from the current balanced literacy methodology used in ACT Public Schools, which teaches children to guess words and only works for some students. It will require moving to an approach that is informed by rigorous scientific

proven research, incorporating explicit, systematic synthetic instruction of phonics as part of the essential elements of reading instruction being phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, underpinned by oral language. In order to properly implement the new Curriculum, the ACT will need to purchase decodable readers for all kindergarten and Year 1 classes.

At the moment, ACT kindergarten students are taught to read with “predictable readers”. They repeat common phrases, such as “Where is the cat? Where is the boy? Where is the bed?” to help children memorise words and use pictures to help children identify unfamiliar words - these cueing strategies have been proven to be inefficient and ineffective as they teach children to guess words rather than sound them out.

Decodable readers are books that only use the letter-sound combinations students have already learned in class. After learning the short ‘c’ sound can sound like ‘c’ as in cat, ‘k’ as in kit and ‘ck’ as in muck, children might read a book about a cat driving a truck.

Research shows poor readers guess words and good readers decode words. These good reading skills require decodable readers in schools.

The NSW Government has provided every single kindergarten class with sets of decodable readers as part of a \$4.3 million investment; one of the largest deployments of new reading materials to classrooms in the state’s history.

End Notes

ⁱ Recent reports identifying underperformance of ACT schools

- A 2018 state-by-state report card from the Grattan Institute found the ACT was trailing the nation in student learning progress, Goss, P., Sonnemann, J., and Emslie, O. (2018). [Measuring student progress: A state-by-state report card. Grattan Institute.](#)
- 2018 analysis by the ANU found there was systemic underperformance in the ACT across all socio-economic groups. A Macintosh and D Wilkinson, [Academic underperformance in ACT schools: An analysis of ACT school performance in NAPLAN over the period 2012 to 2016](#) (The Australian National University, ANU Law School Working Paper, 2018).
- A 2017 Auditor-General's Report on performance information in ACT public schools noted that 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. Multiple reviews of ACT public schools since 2014 have identified shortcomings in ACT schools in their analysis of student performance information and their use of data to inform educational practice. [ACT Auditor-General's Report Performance Information in ACT Public Schools Report No.4 / 2017.](#)
- A 2016 report prepared for the ACT Education Directorate by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems on government school performance in the ACT shows that after taking account of intake and context differences, ACT public schools on average achieve negative results on every measure. Centre for International Research on Education Systems. [Government School Performance in the ACT Analysis Paper](#) prepared by Stephen Lamb for the ACT Education Directorate (redacted).

ⁱⁱ Notes on operation of the ICSEA

- We note that the ACT has had concerns about the extent to which the operation of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) used in the NAPLAN similar schools model has created a bias in interjurisdictional comparisons of NAPLAN performance for the ACT and that in 2020, the National Council of Education Ministers agreed to a proposal by the ACT for a joint ACT/ACARA project to explore the operation of the SEA index in the ACT to determine if there were any anomalies that may affect comparisons with ACT schools. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed progress, however, according to the [2022 ACT Education Directorate's Annual Report Hearing Brief](#) a joint ACT/ACARA paper summarising the final project report was in preparation and will be progressed to education ministers.
- According to Minister Berry's Submission to the Legislative Assembly's 2018 Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools ([submission Number 12 of 20 November 2018](#)), the key issue of concern seems to be that the national ICSEA measure may have the potential to create anomalies in jurisdictions with populations that vary significantly from the national population and that in the ACT, parents and carers are significantly over represented by families with degree qualifications, or higher.
- Pending the outcomes of that report it would appear that the ACT's results are so poor that even if they were discounted in some way to allow for the high educational backgrounds of ACT parents, they would still indicate chronic failure of the school system.