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Office for the Arts, Canberra

National Cultural Policy Submission

I am Dr Emily Baulch, McKenzie Fellow at the University of Melbourne, and children's editor for Bluey. I research the cultures and systems that allow people to become readers.

Children's literacy in Australia is at a crisis point. One third of Australian school students are unable to read proficiently, with the Grattan Institute estimating a long-term cost of over \$40 billion to the national economy (Hunter et al. 2024, 3–10). Missed foundational skills can impede learning across the curriculum, with gaps compounding over time (Hunter et al. 2024, 10–12). Struggling readers face long-term disadvantages in employment, health, and civic participation (Hunter et al. 2024, 14–17).

The issue is not only literacy instruction. It is the absence of sustained cultural systems that build reading for pleasure and book ownership.

In 2024, while working at Ludo Studio, I wrote *Bluey's Little Book* for the UK World Book Day program. It became the best-selling World Book Day title of 2025, selling over 160,000 copies in one month and holding the number one position in the UK market for four weeks. From this experience, I believe there is an opportunity for Australia's National Cultural Policy (Revive) to adopt and adapt the World Book Day model for Australia.

The UK World Book Day Model

The UK World Book Day program is a nationally coordinated reading and book ownership initiative delivered through an industry committee. Each year, publishers pitch £1 book ideas to the World Book Day selection panel of industry experts, which curates the annual list. The panel maintains quality standards and actively encourages inclusion of books from existing series and familiar characters, recognising that familiarity is a key driver of children's engagement and reading uptake. It is industry-led, with publishers paying for the costs of producing the £1/€1.50 books and these titles acting as loss leaders. Bookshops buy the £1/€1.50 books from publishers and give them to children in exchange for their £1/€1.50 book token.

Children receive a book token distributed through schools at minimal per-child cost. Children can swap their World Book Day £1/€1.50 token for any of the World Book Day £1/€1.50 books or get £1 off a full price title (€1.50 off in Ireland) any full price book or audiobook (as long as the book or audiobook costs at least £2.99 (or €3.99 in Ireland) at participating booksellers.

The program has demonstrated measurable outcomes:

- Over 2 million £1/€1.50 books are gifted annually.
- Around 1 in 5 children report the book is their first owned book.
- Approximately 90,000 books are distributed into disadvantaged communities each year.



- 70% of early years settings and 77% of primary schools report WBD is effective in fostering a reading-for-pleasure culture (World Book Day Impact Report 2023, 14).
- 2 in 5 (41%) children and young people who had taken part in World Book Day activities saying that they had bought more books as a result (Picton, Goodwin, and Clark 2021, 7).
- 1 in 4 (26%) children and young people who took part in World Book Day activities in 2019 said they read more with their parents (Picton, Goodwin, and Clark 2021, 11).

It's simple, cheap, and pre-existing model that runs inside existing bookshop and publishing systems. The program gives kids a reason to enter book culture, gives them a book they can own (not borrow), and connects reading to IP, characters and stories they already know and like. Through my research I have found book ownership to be an incredibly important part of building lifelong readers. A limited selection of choice and supported agency has also been found to be a strong mechanism that helps gets kids' reading (Picton, Goodwin, and Clark 2021, 7).

An Australian version would:

- Provide book tokens for all primary school children that are redeemable at any bookshop for a free or discounted book,
- Have annual coordinated publisher + retailer book list,
- Include Australian children's books and support culturally diverse titles, including First Nation books (*Revive Pillar 1*),
- And engage child audiences across Australia, with support for distribution into disadvantaged communities (*Revive Pillar 5*).

I have worked on Bluey's World Book Day book for the UK, which demonstrates the capacity of Australian children's publishing to operate successfully within this system. Australia already has the infrastructure, publishing sector, and cultural assets required. Australia has the infrastructure, the publishing sector, and the cultural assets to implement this immediately. What is missing is a coordinated national mechanism that turns those assets into reading participation for children. This proposal provides that mechanism.

Yours sincerely,



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