

The Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy. As the national association for primary English and literacy educators, PETAA believes that children's access to literature, language and storytelling is foundational to Australia's cultural future.

If Australia is serious about cultural participation, diversity and audience engagement, then schools — particularly school libraries — must be recognised as essential cultural infrastructure.

Reading is one of the earliest and most enduring forms of cultural participation. Through books, children encounter Australian stories, First Nations perspectives, diverse languages and cultures, and the experiences of people beyond their own communities. Reading for pleasure builds empathy, imagination, civic participation and lifelong engagement with arts and culture. Yet access to quality literature is increasingly unequal.

Across Australia, school libraries and qualified teacher librarians remain underfunded and inconsistently staffed. Many schools, particularly in regional, remote and low socio-economic communities, struggle to maintain contemporary and diverse collections. At the same time, teachers face increasing pressure to source quality texts that reflect the breadth of Australian voices and experiences.

PETAA urges the Australian Government to recognise children's literature, school libraries and reading promotion as central components of national cultural policy under the pillars of Strong Cultural Infrastructure, A Place for Every Story and Engaging the Audience.

Specifically, we recommend:

- targeted national investment in school library collections, with priority support for regional, remote and disadvantaged communities;
- renewed funding to support qualified teacher librarians and reading specialists in schools;
- investment in Australian children's authors, illustrators and publishers to ensure Australian stories remain visible and accessible in classrooms and libraries;
- dedicated support for culturally and linguistically diverse literature, including First Nations stories and books reflecting multilingual and culturally diverse Australian communities;
- similar support for the availability of literature reflecting the varied lives of Australian families and community members including diverse abilities, family structures, gender identities etc.
- national reading-for-pleasure initiatives that position reading as a cultural and wellbeing practice, not solely an educational outcome;
- stronger partnerships between schools, libraries, festivals, publishers and cultural organisations to connect children directly with Australian writers and storytellers.

The next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to recognise that cultural engagement begins in childhood. Schools are not only places of learning; they are places where Australia's future readers, writers, artists and audiences are formed.

A culturally ambitious nation ensures every child can see themselves, their communities and their possibilities reflected in books. It ensures all children have access to rich literary experiences regardless of postcode or school sector.

PETAA encourages the Australian Government to place children's reading, literature and equitable access to books at the centre of Australia's cultural future.