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I'm Jessica Raeside, a primary school teacher, educational leader and teacher librarian with over 30 years of teaching experience. I am currently pursuing a PhD in Education, conducting nationwide research into who works in Australian primary school libraries, their roles, and how they collaborate to increase student engagement and improve academic performance.

In the next National Cultural Policy, I'm joining Australia Reads in calling for the Australian Government to **invest in a reading nation**.

It is vital to recognise the critical role and expertise of Teacher Librarians and other skilled school library staff qualified in library science, as they can use their knowledge to foster reading engagement, provide access to books, teach information and digital media literacy, and create a safe environment that supports reading and improves students' social and emotional wellbeing. Empirical evidence confirms that reading, writing, spelling, and grammar outcomes for students in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 are significantly linked to the qualification level of the school librarian (Dix et al., 2020, p. 5). Consequently, students in schools with a qualified Teacher Librarian managing the library demonstrate "up to two months learning gain" and therefore are "more likely to have improved student literacy outcomes" (Dix et al., 2020, p. 5). Yet a recent survey of all 728 Catholic, independent and government schools in South Australia (Dix et al., 2025) found that approximately 6 per cent of schools do not have a physical on-site school library and therefore have no library staff to support students and staff in their teaching and learning. This is despite research demonstrating clear links between well-resourced school libraries and positive student learning outcomes, including reading achievement (Earp, 2020).

That's why we urgently need action from the Australian Government to turn the tide on reading. Reading improves educational and employment outcomes, reduces our stress and loneliness, supports social connection, and increases our empathy for others. However, Australia's 2024 *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) results revealed that over a third of Australian students did not meet expectations for their Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 year levels, with "one in three young learners" demonstrating that they "cannot read at the expected level" (Clary et al., 2025, p. 19). Yet despite these results, it remains non-compulsory for Australian schools to have a school library on the premises; as a result, not all Australian schools have a designated library space (Softlink, 2025). Furthermore, around 7% of Australian Year 4 students attend schools with libraries that do not allow students to borrow books to take home from these collections (Hilman, 2024, p. 3).

Additionally, some schools have a \$0 library budget to purchase newly released children's literature or relevant, up-to-date reading material for their students. This means some schools are denying students access to school libraries, creating an equity issue. On the contrary, when governments invest in school libraries, they create a better, fairer education system for all.

Furthermore, many schools are choosing to employ staff to manage the school library without a library qualification (Flynn, 2025; Hay, 2022), rather than hiring knowledgeable, qualified library staff who can curate resources and collaborate with teachers, students, and the school community to share their expertise and enhance all aspects of teaching and learning.

Therefore, to ensure all Australians have access to the life-changing benefits of reading, I'd like the National Cultural Policy to include interventions that provide:

- National reading campaigns for adults, children and young people, helping them overcome the barriers to regular reading.
- **A library in every school, with professional library qualified staff and collection budgets**, and more support for educators and parents to create strong reading cultures for students.
- Greater community access to books and reading through author touring initiatives, voucher schemes, and book club programs.
- Promotions that showcase Australian stories, highlighting contemporary titles and First Nations creators.

Kind regards,

Jessica L. Raeside

M.Ed. Leadership (ACU), M.Ed. (Teacher Librarianship; CSU), B.Teach (ACU), B.Ed. (ACU), Grad. Cert. Ed. (EC), AALIA (CP) Schools.

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