

Investing in School Libraries and Qualified Teacher Librarians

For: Australian Government - National Cultural Policy Public Consultation 2026

I am Dr Kay Oddone, Director of Linking Learning Advisory - a research and advisory practice in Australian teacher librarianship and school library education. With more than 25 years' experience across schools and higher education, I write in support of the Australia Reads campaign and to advocate for a specific and critical investment: every Australian student must have access to a well-resourced school library led by a qualified teacher librarian, supported by a team of qualified library professionals.

The challenge: reading decline meets a proliferation of synthetic content

Reading builds education and employment outcomes, reduces stress and loneliness, deepens social connection, and strengthens empathy. Yet reading rates are falling. At the same time, generative AI tools produce synthetic text, images, and narrative at an unprecedented scale, flooding the information environment that students navigate daily. These two challenges are deeply connected: if we want young Australians to value authentic creative work - the skilled, purposeful craft of human authors, illustrators, and storytellers - we must create the conditions in which they encounter it regularly and meaningfully.

What I would like to see in the new National Cultural Policy

1. A library in every school, with professional staff and collection budgets

The most direct investment the Government can make is to ensure every school has a qualified teacher librarian, supported by qualified library professionals and a dedicated collection budget. This is the mechanism by which students gain consistent access to high-quality Australian literature, picture books, and rich non-fiction texts. Adequate resourcing also enables schools to bring cultural creators directly to students. As a school librarian participant in Merga and Mason's (2019) study explained, a well-funded library allowed them to "purchase a great selection of e-books and e-audio books, to purchase print books and to get authors to come and visit our students" (p. 178).

2. Cultural creator visits, facilitated through the school library

Author and illustrator visits give students direct encounters with authentic creative work - a powerful counterpoint to synthetic content. These programs are most effectively organised by the teacher librarian. Unlike classroom teachers, teacher librarians hold a unique cross-school position, working across all year levels, with all

teachers, and spanning all curriculum areas (Oddone, Garrison, & Gagen-Spriggs, 2024). This reach means cultural creator visits can engage every student in the school, not only selected classes. Supporting author touring programs and book club initiatives, with school libraries as the hub, is a high-impact and cost-effective policy lever.

3. First Nations creators at the centre

Investment in school library collections and author touring programs must actively prioritise First Nations creators. Every student deserves the opportunity to encounter contemporary First Nations stories told by First Nations authors and illustrators - building cultural understanding from the earliest years.

To ensure all Australians have access to the life-changing benefits of reading, I would like to see the National Cultural Policy include:

- A library in every school, with professional staff, dedicated collection budgets, and support for educators and parents to build strong reading cultures.
- National reading campaigns for children and young people that acknowledge the challenge of navigating synthetic AI-generated content and support engagement with authentic creative work.
- Author and illustrator touring initiatives that bring cultural creators into schools, facilitated by qualified teacher librarians with whole-school reach.
- Promotions highlighting contemporary Australian titles and First Nations creators.

Kind regards,

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References

- Merga, M. K., & Mason, S. (2019). Building a school reading culture: Teacher librarians' perceptions of enabling and constraining factors. *Australian Journal of Education*, 63(2), 173-189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944119844544>
- Oddone, K., Garrison, K., & Gagen-Spriggs, K. (2024). Navigating generative AI: The role of teacher librarians in supporting students and teachers. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 73(1), 3-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2023.2289093>