



ACT Education Directorate  
Expert Panel  
Via email: [literacynumeracyinquiry@act.gov.au](mailto:literacynumeracyinquiry@act.gov.au)

1 March 2024

## Re: Inquiry into Literacy and Numeracy in ACT Public Schools

VolunteeringACT welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to this inquiry and highlight the important role volunteers already play in ACT Schools, and the opportunities to expand their involvement.

Volunteers are the often-invisible part of the workforce supporting a range of services and activities across the ACT, across several workstreams including the Education sector. Volunteers are already providing vital assistance to ACT's schools via Parent and Citizen Councils, and there are several existing volunteer-led initiatives to assist children with literacy skills offered out in the community via organisations such as LibrariesACT – for example, Sensory Story Time<sup>1</sup> and the Story Dogs<sup>2</sup> program. Involving volunteers alongside other school professionals adds considerable value and enhances the overall learning experience for students.

Over the past 12 months, VolunteeringACT has received numerous enquiries from individual ACT schools regarding volunteering, either to facilitate volunteering activities for school-aged children, or to find volunteers to support in-school activities. We have learned that at one time, many ACT public schools had volunteers regularly giving their time to provide informal support to children in areas such as reading. However, some schools report a loss of their connections with that volunteer base, and that there doesn't seem to be a current overall volunteer program in place to help facilitate this.

Historically, the ACT has enjoyed the highest levels of formal and informal volunteering participation in the country<sup>3</sup> However, research shows that formal rates of volunteering have been declining over the past few years across Australia, and in the ACT, the number of people volunteering decreased dramatically during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 30% in late 2019 to 24.8 as at April 2021.<sup>4</sup>

The same research also confirms that volunteering across all jurisdictions has not yet recovered from these impacts and although there have been volunteers returning in some parts of the volunteering sector, there are several areas still struggling to fully staff their volunteering programs, re-engage volunteers they have lost, and attract new volunteers.<sup>5</sup> It is likely that the above impacts have contributed to the reduced numbers of volunteers currently active in ACT public schools.

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<sup>1</sup> [Sensory Story Time & Supporting Resources - Libraries ACT](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Literacy Charities Serving all of Australia | Story Dogs](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Table 6.1 General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2020 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Biddle and Mathew Gray, [Volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic - April 2021.pdf \(anu.edu.au\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

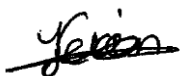
Further, the increase in cost of living and housing cost pressures are also having an impact on the capacity of people to volunteer across Australia. People experiencing financial difficulties were more likely to have stopped volunteering during the height of the pandemic and are less likely to have recommenced, and financial barriers to volunteering can be significant.<sup>6</sup> There is also an emerging trend regarding older people who may previously have had more time to engage in volunteering, but who may be increasingly caring for grandchildren to assist families with cost pressures of child care, or even returning to the workplace themselves to supplement their retirement incomes etc. These factors could also be contributing to reduced numbers of volunteers available during school hours.

VolunteeringACT recognises the importance of volunteers within education programs and supports greater involvement of volunteers in ACT public schools. Volunteer programs are generally cost-effective to run, can support and enhance other service delivery mechanisms, and provide a great return on investment. However, while volunteers offer their time for free, there are costs associated with running volunteer programs and any school volunteering program would need to be fully resourced, to ensure volunteering activities are occurring safely and ethically, in line with the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.<sup>7</sup>

VolunteeringACT is currently working in partnership with ACT Government via the Community Services Directorate to develop an ACT Volunteering Strategy, aligned with the National Strategy for Volunteering strategic objectives, and to deliver on ACT priorities. Current work involves linking other ACT Government Directorates into the development process, including the Education Directorate. The ACT Strategy presents further opportunities to establish linkages between school activities and available volunteers, in a coordinated way across our region.

VolunteeringACT would welcome the opportunity to have greater involvement in further discussions with ACT Government and the Education Directorate about opportunities to connect more volunteers with ACT Public Schools. We would be happy to meet with the Directorate to discuss the issues raised in this letter, coordinate any further discussions with our sector partners and provide any additional information on volunteering you feel may be of assistance.

Yours sincerely,



Jean Giese  
CEO  
VolunteeringACT

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<sup>6</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 36-38

<sup>7</sup> [National Standards for Volunteer Involvement 2024 \(volunteeringaustralia.org\)](https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/national-standards-for-volunteer-involvement-2024)