

Learning Starts at the Local Library:

The Role of NSW Public Libraries in Solving
the State's Early Literacy Crisis

"Public library storytimes are so much more than just the reading of books. They are the planting of seeds for lifelong learning, the awakening of imagination, and the widening of mind and spirit."

March 2023



Executive summary

New South Wales (NSW) is facing significant and concerning declines in childhood literacy levels, falling behind both national and OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) benchmarks. These declines put the state at risk of significant and long-term negative social and economic consequences.

An adult population with advanced literacy skills is essential to NSW in 2023 and beyond. Our knowledge-based economy, rapid technological development and complex social environment all demand strong communication and information synthesis capabilities in the workforce and in the community. These skills support economic growth and address social and political challenges.

The lion's share of the solution to NSW's looming literacy crisis lies in early childhood literacy interventions with pre-school aged children. Children who start school without foundational early years language and literacy skills continue to struggle academically and socially into adulthood. Both neurological and educational research makes it clear that birth to age five is the optimal window to build a lifelong foundation for language and literacy.

There is a wealth of national and international research evidence that public libraries play a key role in developing these early literacy skills.

Providing high-quality early literacy activities to NSW children through public libraries – community spaces that are free, welcoming and accessible – is a critical and cost-effective strategy to redressing the state's literacy declines.

This report analyses the most up-to-date data on childhood and adult literacy to show the extent of the looming literacy crisis facing NSW, and to outline the consequences for the state of not urgently addressing declining literacy standards.

The report also synthesises research into early literacy library programs, including internal evaluations and feedback from library workers from across NSW, to outline the central role that NSW libraries should play in an early literacy strategy for the state.

The evidence presented in the report demonstrates that with the right strategies and resourcing, the public library system is ideally placed to develop and embed enhanced early literacy initiatives in NSW to solve the state's literacy crisis.

The report presents several key findings on NSW's declining literacy and child development outcomes:

- Over 20% of pre-school aged children in NSW (19,067 children in 2021) are developmentally vulnerable on one or more key skills domain.
- 6.2% of pre-school aged children in NSW are specifically vulnerable on language skills (with a further 9% considered 'at risk') and 8.4% on communication skills (with a further 15.6% considered 'at risk').
- The Programme for International Student Assessment reading mean score in NSW dropped 46 points between 2000 and 2018. Since 2015, NSW has also fallen below the national reading average for Australia.
- NSW ranks 6th of the states and territories in mean reading literacy performance, lagging behind the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia.
- The proportion of NSW Year 9 students who are below the National Proficient Reading Standard has increased from 27% in 2000 to 44% in 2018.
- 13.4% of adults aged 15–74 in NSW are at or below Level 1 (very low) literacy skills, while 29.6% are at Level 2 (low).
- The ongoing impact of educational disruptions between 2019 and 2021 due to COVID-19 is likely to produce further declines in literacy outcomes over the coming years.

There are also five core findings around why NSW public libraries should be a priority for early literacy program resourcing:

1. Libraries are local, accessible and free, and are welcoming environments for all families.
2. Library literacy activities are multi-generational and address the literacy gap by supporting the critical relationship between children and parents or caregivers.
3. Libraries and library staff have the existing skills, infrastructure and community connections to build effective literacy strategies and programs within and beyond the library.
4. Other states in Australia have had significant success with investment into consolidated library early literacy efforts, putting NSW children at risk of falling further behind their peers nationally.
5. Enhanced funding of library early literacy programs is likely to yield a high return on the investment.

NSW children are falling behind literacy standards

NSW is facing concerning declines in childhood literacy levels, with NSW children falling behind both national and OECD benchmarks. Children who start school with literacy vulnerabilities often face social and academic challenges into adulthood.² Declining childhood literacy indicators and a lack of investment into pre-school literacy put the state at risk of significant, and long-term, social and economic consequences.

Data from the 2021 Australian Early Development Census shows that the percentage of NSW children who attend a pre-school program and whose language or communication skills make them 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' has been growing over the past seven years.³

Over 21% (19,067 children) are developmentally vulnerable on one or more of five key skills domains (physical, social, emotional, language and communication).

In relation to the skills important for literacy development, 6.2% of pre-school aged children in NSW are vulnerable on language skills (with a further 9% considered 'at risk') and 8.4% are developmentally vulnerable on communication skills (with a further 15.6% considered 'at risk').⁴ The table below compares the percentage and number of children in NSW and Australia who fall into 'developmentally at risk' and 'developmentally vulnerable' categories in terms of language and communication skills. Without early intervention, these numbers are likely to increase into the future.

Skills Domain	Developmentally At Risk		Developmentally Vulnerable	
	Language	Communication	Language	Communication
	<i>Child is interested in reading or writing, can count or recognise numbers and shapes</i>	<i>Child can tell a story, communicate with adults and children, articulate themselves</i>	<i>Child is interested in reading or writing, can count or recognise numbers and shapes</i>	<i>Child can tell a story, communicate with adults and children, articulate themselves</i>
NSW	8,092 (9.0%)	14,068 (15.6%)	5,576 (6.2%)	7,618 (8.4%)
Australia	29,091 (10.1%)	41,882 (14.5%)	21,107 (7.3%)	24,064 (8.4%)

Figure 1. Percentage and number of children developmentally at risk and vulnerable in language and communication skills domains in 2021, NSW and Australia, Australian Early Development Census.

² World Literacy Foundation (2021). Submission to inquiry into adult literacy and its importance. https://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/AdultLiteracy/Submissions.

³ Australian Early Development Census (2021). Data explorer. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data-explorer/>.

⁴ Australian Early Development Census (2021). Data explorer. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data-explorer/>.

This negative trend in literacy skills is also evident in primary and secondary school children in NSW. The most recent data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) shows that nearly one in five Year 4 students in the state has reading skills at the Low or Below Low benchmark.⁵ The PIRLS scoring ranks Australia at 21 out of 50 in mean reading performance of the countries surveyed; this is the second-lowest ranking for an English-speaking country, trailing behind Singapore, Hong Kong, Ireland, Northern Ireland and England.

The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – which measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges – also shows dire declines in the reading skills of NSW students over the last two decades. The PISA reading mean score dropped 46 points in NSW between 2000 and 2018.⁶ Since 2015, NSW has also fallen below the national reading average for Australia.⁷



Figure 2. The PISA reading mean scores, NSW and Australia, 2000–2018, Australian Council for Educational Research⁸

⁵ Thomson, S., Hillman, K., Schmid, M., Rodrigues, S. & Fullarton, J. (2016). PIRLS 2016: Highlights from Australia's perspective. Australian Council for Educational Research, p. 12. <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=pirls>.

⁶ NSW Parliamentary Research Service (2020). NSW school education: PISA 2018: Socioeconomic background and proposals for reform, p. 4. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/researchpapers/Pages/NSW-school-education-PISA-2018.aspx>.

⁷ Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C., & Schmid, M. (2019). PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's results: Volume 1 student performance. Australian Council for Educational Research. p. 40 (table 3.1) and 51 (figure 3.8). <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1035&context=ozpisa>.

⁸ Ibid.

As the following table shows, NSW now ranks sixth of the states and territories in mean reading literacy performance, lagging behind the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia.

State	Ranking	PISA 2018 Mean reading literacy performance
ACT	1	535
WA	2	512
Vic.	3	511
Qld	4	503
SA	5	496
NSW	6	493
NT	7	481
Tas.	8	479

Figure 3. Ranking of Australian states and territories, PISA 2018: mean reading scores, PISA data on Australian student performance in reading literacy, Australian Council for Educational Research⁹

PISA data further shows that the proportion of NSW Year 9 students who are below the National Proficient Reading Standard has been increasing steadily, from 27% in 2000 to 44% in 2018.¹⁰

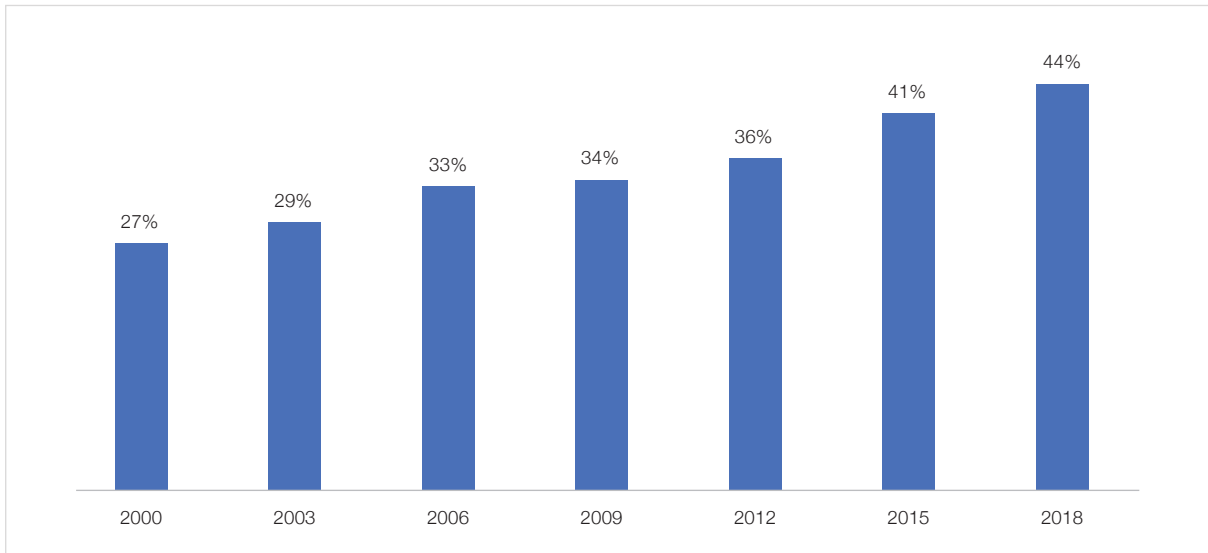


Figure 4. Proportion (%) of NSW students below the National Proficient Reading Standard, 2000–2018, Australia Council for Educational Research¹¹

⁹ Thomson et al. (2019), p. 48 (table 3.4).

¹⁰ Thomson et al. (2019), p. 54 (table 3.5).

¹¹ Ibid.

Low literacy is impacting adults

Low literacy is also apparent in the adult population of NSW. 13.4% of adults aged 15–74 in NSW are at or below Level 1 (very low) literacy skills, while 29.6% are at Level 2 (low) according to the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).¹² NSW adults who score at these literacy levels can experience significant problems comprehending written information in everyday life, including online information, news media, job advertisements, and health information like medication labels.¹³

Scoring at Level 3 and above in this assessment is strongly correlated with higher rates of labour force participation and higher salaries and wages. PIAAC results show that poorer literacy skills place individuals at risk of limited participation in the labour market but also in everyday social and civic life.¹⁴

An adult population with advanced literacy skills is essential to NSW in 2023 and beyond. Our knowledge-based economy, rapid technological development and complex social environment all demand strong communication, cognition and information synthesis capabilities in the workforce and in the community to support economic growth and to address social and political challenges.

LITERACY IS A SOCIAL EQUITY ISSUE

NSW faces the same two-pronged twenty-first century literacy challenge identified by researchers in the United States: the universal need to better prepare children for the twenty-first century literacy demands and the need to reduce the disparities in literacy attainment across different social groups.¹⁵

Ensuring equity in literacy attainment is particularly important for NSW. One-third of Australia's children live in NSW. This includes significant numbers of children who are disproportionately negatively impacted by literacy and education inequalities.

NSW is home to over 34% of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and has the highest number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of any state.¹⁶ This is a growing community, increasing from 2.8% of the state's population in 2016 to 3.2% in 2021.¹⁷ There is a significant development gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other children nationally – 41% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are developmentally vulnerable (compared to 20% of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children – and the gap is especially notable in the language and cognitive skills domain: 21% vulnerable compared with 5.7%.¹⁸

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013). Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011–12, table 3. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/programme-international-assessment-adult-competencies-australia/latest-release#methodology>.

¹³ Quach, J., Elek, C., Beatson, R., Bridie, J., & Goldfeld, S. (2017). Reviewing the evidence for supporting children's early language and literacy development. Centre for Community Child Health, p. 4.

¹⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013). Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/programme-international-assessment-adult-competencies-australia/latest-release>.

¹⁵ Murnane, R., Sawhill, I. & Snow, C. (2012). 'Literacy challenges for the twenty-first century: Introducing the issue'. *The Future of Children* 22, no. 2, 3–15.

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023). Australia's children: Australian children and their families. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/background/australian-children-and-their-families>.

¹⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022). Census of population and housing: counts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/census-population-and-housing-counts-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release>.

¹⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021). Indigenous education and skills. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-education-and-skills>.

This literacy gap is also evident in school. While the difference in reading and numeracy at all year levels has narrowed to 3–11 percentage points between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia, 20–25% of Indigenous students are still below the national minimum standards in reading.¹⁹

Children with diverse language backgrounds also have a higher risk of poorer literacy outcomes. Over one-quarter (26.6%) of people living in NSW speak a language other than English at home,²⁰ and the proportion of school students with English as an additional language is increasing, from 20.3% in 2015 to 23.7% in 2019.²¹ NSW also (equal with Victoria) receives the largest proportion of refugee arrival children, with 31% of refugee children who arrived in Australia in 2017–18 living in NSW.²² Research shows that children in a non-English speaking household were less likely to be read to or told a story on a regular basis (62%) compared to households in which English was the main language (81%).²³

Across the developmental domains Australian Early Development Census, the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable is 2.3 times higher for children with a language background other than English (LBOTE) than for children who speak English only.²⁴ Nine in ten children (from either LBOTE or English-only backgrounds) who are not proficient in English are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains.²⁵

Another group at-risk of falling behind in literacy attainment are children from lower socioeconomic areas and families. Only 70% of parents in lower socioeconomic areas tell or read stories to their children on a regular basis.²⁶ 25% of the children who are never read to or told stories live in marginalised communities.²⁷ The Australian Early Development Census found that children living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas had rates of developmental vulnerability in relation to language and cognitive skills that were 4.4 times greater than their peers from the least disadvantaged areas.²⁸

While robust data on the impact of COVID-19 on Australian childhood literacy and development is not yet available, it is likely that NSW childhood literacy rates have declined further as a result of the pandemic. Globally, pandemic-related disruption to education has had a negative impact on all forms of learning acquisition, with younger and more marginalised children facing the most acute learning loss.²⁹

Providing high-quality early literacy activities to NSW children in the community in spaces that are free, welcoming and accessible is a critical component to redressing the state's literacy declines. This report outlines the central role that NSW libraries should play in an early literacy strategy for the state.

19 Australian Government (2020). Closing the gap report 2020: Literacy and numeracy. <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/literacy-and-numeracy>.

20 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021). Language used at home (LANP) by State/Territory (STE).

21 Hanrahan, C. & Masige, S. (2021). 'Report shows thousands of school students in NSW speak English as a second language'. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-16/nsw-schools-support-students-with-english-as-second-language/100206024>.

22 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022). Australia's children: Australian children and their families. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/background/australian-children-and-their-families>.

23 Ibid.

24 Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2022). Australian Early Development Census national report 2021, p. 34. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>.

25 Ibid., pp. 92-3.

26 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022). Australia's children: Australian children and their families, p. 186.

27 Ibid.

28 Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2022). Australian Early Development Census national report 2021: Early childhood development in Australia. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>.

29 UNICEF (2022). COVID-19: Scale of education loss 'nearly insurmountable', warns UNICEF'. <https://www.unicef.org/eap/press-releases/covid19-scale-education-loss-nearly-insurmountable-warns-unicef>.

Early years matter – brains are built from age 0–5

The lion's share of the solution to NSW's looming literacy crisis lies in early childhood interventions with pre-school age children. Both neurological and educational research clearly shows that birth to age five is the optimal window to build a lifelong language and literacy foundation.

There is a wealth of national and international research evidence that libraries play a key role in developing these early literacy skills.³⁰

Public libraries are particularly important because not all children in the 0–5 age group participate in formal education or childcare, and parents and caregivers are central to children's early brain and learning development. Libraries provide literacy interventions in accessible community spaces that centre families, ensuring more under 5s in NSW are given the opportunity to thrive.

Reading difficulties form at a very young age, and children who enter school without a strong literacy foundation quickly fall, and remain, behind their peers.³¹ Language and literacy difficulties in early childhood are associated with long-term impacts on children's academic success throughout their schooling.³²

However, impacts go far beyond educational performance. Children with literacy difficulties experience associated social and health issues, including increased risk of mental health conditions like anxiety and depression, low self-esteem and self-confidence, and difficulties in relationships with their peers, such as bullying.³³

The consequences of starting school behind in early literacy skills often continue into adulthood. Low levels of adult literacy impact individuals' wellbeing, quality of life and mental health. There are social and financial costs to both individuals and the community, with higher levels of unemployment and welfare dependence for adults with lower levels of literacy.³⁴

"Health, mental health, housing, educational outcomes, employment opportunities, income levels, involvement with crime and civic participation for individuals in our society can all be affected by an ability to read, with negative outcomes for those who are unable to read."³⁵

Strong starts in early childhood can prevent these negative outcomes.

30 Lucas, F. (2013). 'Many spokes, same hub: Facilitating collaboration among library and early-childhood services to improve outcomes for children'. *The Australian Library Journal*, 62(3), 196–203.

31 Campbell-Hicks, R. (2016). 'Early literacy programmes in public libraries: Best practice'. *The Australian Library Journal*, 65(2), 121–9.

32 O'Hare, A. (2010). 'Dyslexia: What do paediatricians need to know?'. *Paediatrics and Child Health* 20(7), 338–43.

33 Quach, J., Elek, C., Beatson, R., Bridie, J. & Goldfeld, S. (2017). *Reviewing the evidence for supporting children's early language and literacy development*. Centre for Community Child Health.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

35 Campbell-Hicks (2016), p. 121.

Reading aloud to children aged 0–5 and exploring language through talking, playing and singing helps to develop the pre-literacy skills critical to learning to read and write.

These activities also help children’s brains to strengthen the neural connections and pathways that govern their overall learning ability and determine their academic performance once they start school. Children who are not read to or encouraged to explore language can likewise experience drastically inhibited brain development as brain plasticity reduces and the critical window of opportunity for learning development closes.³⁶

The concept of the ‘Word Gap’ is used to describe the enormous differences in heard vocabulary during the first five years for disadvantaged compared to advantaged children and is linked to brain development and subsequent school performance.³⁷

Children from low-income households, families with limited English proficiency and otherwise marginalised communities are negatively impacted by the Word Gap. Research from the *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* suggests that children from high socioeconomic status families are exposed to four million more words by age four than those from low socioeconomic status families.³⁸

Book reading sessions like library storytimes can remedy the Word Gap. Reading to children provides a high level of vocabulary exposure and introduces a much wider range of words than other interactions between children and caregivers.

Research from the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioural Paediatrics* finds that children who are regularly read to hear 1.4 million more words than children who are not read to by the time they turn five.³⁹ And, children who are read to six or seven times a week have a literacy level almost a year ahead of those who are not read to.⁴⁰

36 Hawley, T. (2000). *Starting smart: How early experiences affect brain development* [second edition]. Ounce of Prevention Fund. <https://www.startearly.org/app/uploads/pdf/StartingSmart.pdf>.

37 Hart, B., Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.; Brushe, M.E., Lynch, J., Reilly, S. et al. (2021). ‘The education word gap emerges by 18 months: Findings from an Australian prospective study’. *BMC Pediatrics* 21(247).

38 Gilkerson, J., Richards, J. A., Warren, S. F., Montgomery, J. K., Greenwood, C. R., Kimbrough, O. D., Hansen, J. H. L. & Paul, T. D. (2017). ‘Mapping the early language environment using all-day recordings and automated analysis’. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 26(2), 248–65.

39 Logan, J. A. R., Justice, L. M., Yumus, M. & Chaparro-Moreno, L. J. (2019). ‘When children are not read to at home: The million word gap’. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 40(5), 383.

40 State Library of Victoria (2015). *Reading and literacy for all: A strategic framework for Victorian public libraries, 2015–2018*. <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Reading-and-literacy-for-all-industry-report.pdf>.

NSW public libraries are the right spaces for early literacy solutions

“Far too many people still hold the archaic view of libraries as twentieth-century book depositories, rather than the twenty-first century conduits of culture, learning and social connection that they have become. Public libraries play an important role in their respective communities, and are fundamentally important informational, educational, cultural, and social institutions.”⁴¹

NSW public libraries are already working at the coalface of early childhood literacy across the community. Highly popular library activities like ‘storytime’, ‘baby rhyme time’ and ‘toddler time’ are often under-recognised in policy and funding; these activities are professionally designed early literacy sessions that promote and develop literacy acquisition for young children and provide caregivers with the opportunities, training and tools critical to their children’s development.⁴²

NSW libraries also run various other early literacy programs, including information events for families and the distribution of resources and materials to the community. Library early literacy outreach programs and partnerships work with childcare educators, parenting groups, health providers and other community groups to have the widest possible community impact.

Surveys of NSW library users conducted by the State Library of NSW show that many users see literacy and education benefits for children as a key outcome of their library usage, with 32% nominating ‘supported my children’s education’ as an outcome and 24.4% nominating ‘supported my children’s early (0–5 years) development’.⁴³

The potential of these existing programs to expand in scope and depth to reach more children state-wide is hampered by a lack of resourcing, coordination and state-level support. Many local councils have yet to recognise early literacy programming as essential to library services, and therefore do not prioritise these initiatives for funding and allocation of staff.⁴⁴ State government support is critical to maximise the potential of these programs to address the looming literacy crisis.

Libraries are already well-known to many in the community as safe, non-threatening and enjoyable spaces where all are welcome.⁴⁵ Australian public library services were accessed by more than nine million registered library members from 2019–20, which is 36.3% of Australia’s population.⁴⁶

In NSW, there were three million library members and 17.1 million in-person visits to the state’s 363 public libraries in 2021.⁴⁷ These libraries are easily accessible to community members, with more public libraries in NSW than shopping centres.

41 Twomey, K. (2017). ‘Libraries building communities: The need for local government to acknowledge the role of public libraries in community building and engagement’. The State Library of NSW. <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/libraries-building-communities>.

42 Stempel, G. (2009). ‘Children, early reading and a literate Australia’. *The Australian Library Journal*, 58(4), 362–8.

43 Library Council of New South Wales (2008). *Enriching communities: The value of public libraries in New South Wales*. <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/enriching-communities-value-public-libraries-nsw>.

44 Djonov, E., Torr, M. & Pham, L. (2017). *Early literacy in NSW public libraries: A survey of library staff involved in early literacy initiatives*. State Library of NSW. https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/early_literacy_survey_summary.pdf.

45 Stempel (2009), p. 363.

46 State Library of Queensland (2021). *Australian public libraries statistical report 2019-20*. <https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla-publibstats-2019-20.pdf>.

47 State Library of NSW (2021). *NSW public library statistics 2020–21*. www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/advice-best-practice/public-library-statistics.

Surveys conducted by the State Library of NSW found that over 98% of those surveyed valued public libraries for 'being a safe and pleasant place to visit' and over 93% for 'facilitating lifelong learning'. The library users surveyed also recognised the key role libraries played in education, with the top five outcomes from public library use identified as enhanced quality of life; enhanced enjoyment from hobbies; ability to obtain information not available elsewhere; facilitation of lifelong learning; and support for children's education.⁴⁸

Public libraries are uniquely placed to reach children not in formal early childcare and at the 'babies and toddlers' formative ages. This is especially critical in Australia, where formal early learning participation is among the lowest in the developed world, with less than one-in-five children aged three taking part in early childhood education, compared to an OECD average of 70%.⁴⁹

Libraries can be especially effective when resourced to offer outreach and develop partnerships in the community, such as through parent groups, play groups and other community events.⁵⁰

Library literary sessions are designed to be enjoyable and fun for both children and caregivers, which increases a 'ripple effect': these sessions encourage further family engagement with the library (such as book borrowing or bringing older siblings to other events) as well as enabling 'word-of-mouth' marketing that builds trust in the library in the wider community through participants' positive experiences.⁵¹

Surveys of library staff show they have high awareness of the need to draw in and build trust with 'hard-to-reach' families who have not visited the library previously, especially for libraries serving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, refugee communities, and families experiencing intergenerational illiteracy.⁵²

Learning for the 0–5 age group is deeply dependent on children's relationships and interactions with their parents and caregivers. Early literacy interventions are most effective when they draw upon this critical bond. As Campbell-Hicks notes, given that early literacy development is 'a social skill that requires effective and positive relationships between adults and small children'⁵³ public libraries provide a unique space, quite different from formal childcare or the home, where those relationships can be supported and nurtured in beneficial ways.

Results from evaluations of public library early literacy programs globally uphold their key value in engaging parents and other caregivers in activities that promote literacy.⁵⁴

Library-based literacy programs in Australia use established evidence on how literacy skills develop in early childhood. Yet libraries also have the unique capacity to tailor their initiatives to respond directly to local needs in the specific communities they serve.⁵⁵ They can act as 'active connectors', connecting families to other early literacy resources, programs and service providers.⁵⁶

48 Library Council of New South Wales (2008). *Enriching communities: The value of public libraries in New South Wales*.

49 State Library of Victoria (2018). *Reading and literacy for all: A strategic framework for Victorian public libraries*.

50 Djonov et al. (2017), p. 19.

51 Barber, P. & Wallace, L. (2010). 'Building a buzz: Libraries and word-of-mouth marketing'. ALA Store. <https://www.alastore.ala.org/content/building-buzz-libraries-word-mouth-marketing>.

52 Djonov et al. (2017), p. 69.

53 Campbell-Hicks, R. (2016). 'Early literacy programmes in public libraries: Best practice'. *The Australian Library Journal*, 65(2), 121.

54 Crist, B., Donovan, C. V., Doran-Myers, M. & Hofschire, L. (2020). 'Supporting parents in early literacy through libraries (SPELL): An evaluation of a multi-site library project'. *Public Library Quarterly*, 39(2), 89–101.

55 Connaway, L. S., Faniel, I., Brannon, B., Cantrell, J., Cyr, C., Doyle, B., Gallagher, P., Lang, K., Lavoie, B., Mason, J. & Werf, T. van der. (2021). *New model library: Pandemic effects and library directions*. OCLC. <https://apo.org.au/node/314831>.

56 Djonov et al. (2017), p. 3.

COST BENEFITS

Government investment in early childhood development is a proven long-term strategy to boost economic development and productivity. Returns include stronger workforce participation and higher tax revenue.⁵⁷

In turn, childhood language and literacy difficulties result in significant direct costs for the national education system and higher childhood healthcare expenditure. Longer-term costs of low literacy in the adult population include increased costs of adult healthcare, adult literacy education provision, crime and the justice system, and social services.

Analyses of the long-term outcomes of literacy difficulties in the United Kingdom conservatively estimate that the total costs arising from failure to master basic literacy skills in the primary school years are between £5,000 and £43,000 per individual to the age of 37, and between £5,000 and £64,000 over a lifetime.⁵⁸

Australian government language and literacy policy tends to focus on investment within schools and programs aimed at school-aged children.⁵⁹

Addressing the developmental phases for 0–5-year-olds is not only more developmentally effective in targeting the key ‘window of opportunity’ for long-term literacy gains but is also particularly cost effective in reducing the need and cost of later remedial educational interventions in primary and high schools.

Studies show that increased government investment in early childhood development can result in annual returns between 8–17%,⁶⁰ with returns benefiting children, families, governments and businesses.⁶¹ Major international economic analyses show consistently higher return for investment in pre-school interventions compared to the same spending on schooling, due to the enhanced brain development capacities of the early years.⁶²

Australian data on cost–benefit modelling shows that investing \$1 in a person’s early childhood ensures \$2 return on investment as that child grows up.⁶³

Economic analyses of public library investment also consistently show strong returns.⁶⁴

57 The Front Project (2019). A smart investment for a smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia. <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/economic-analysis>.

58 The Every Child a Chance Trust (2009). The long term costs of literacy difficulties (second edition). https://readingrecovery.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/long_term_costs_of_literacy_difficulties_2nd_edition_2009.pdf.

59 Quach et al. (2017).

60 Campbell-Hicks (2016).

61 The Front Project (2019). A smart investment for a smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia.

62 Kilburn, M. R. & Karoly, L. A. (2008). ‘What does economics tell us about early childhood policy?’ RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9352.html.

63 The Front Project (2019).

64 IFLA (n.d) ‘Library return on investment. Reviewing the evidence from the last 10 years’ https://www.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/assets/hq/library_roi.pdf.

A 2008 valuation of NSW public libraries valued the state-wide benefit of public libraries at a structured estimate of \$1.216 billion, representing a benefit–cost ratio of 4.24 against the 2004-05 investment of \$287 million. This valuation shows that each dollar expended on public libraries generated \$4.24 of economic benefit. The inclusion of intangible benefits would significantly boost this return figure.⁶⁵

Similarly, research in Queensland has quantified the state's 'library dividend' as \$2.3 of value generated for every dollar invested by state and local government,⁶⁶ and in Victoria, a 2011 report showed a return of \$3.56 for every dollar invested.⁶⁷

Based on existing analysis of the return on investment in both early literacy programs and public libraries, investment into early literacy programs through public libraries will be money wisely spent. Directing literacy funding to libraries will build on the existing success of current programs, leverage the critical expertise of library staff, and ensure literacy programs are run through spaces that are inclusive, safe and accessible for a wide range of families.

⁶⁵ Library Council of New South Wales (2008). *Enriching communities: The value of public libraries in New South Wales*, p. 7.

⁶⁶ State Library of Queensland (2012). *The library dividend: Summary report*. <https://content.plconnect.slq.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/SLQ-librarydividendsummary-2012.pdf>.

⁶⁷ State Library of Victoria (2011). *Dollars, sense and public libraries: The landmark study of the socio-economic value of Victorian public libraries*. <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Dollars-sense-public-libraries-technical-report.pdf>.

New South Wales needs a state-wide approach

Despite significant efforts from individual NSW libraries and their staff, ad hoc resourcing and a lack of state-wide coordination and support means NSW is falling behind other states, which have more consolidated approaches to early literacy programs in libraries and have had significant success with flagship, state-wide programs that enable libraries to partner with other services for wide reach and impact.

Surveys of NSW library staff note in particular how budgetary constraints limit outreach and education events, program evaluations and ongoing professional development for staff in NSW.⁶⁸

“We have had a wonderful response from local preschools and families after the first full year of our family literacy program in 2022, but we only have the resources to visit each preschool once per year, even though preschools are highly engaged and asking for visits once per term.

In lieu of any centralised program template, I have had to develop the program from scratch and do not have the time or resources to train more staff and expand the program. It would be wonderful to have a place to go for inspiration and collaboration, such as the resources and training provided by the Better Beginnings Program in WA, and a way to inspire and educate more library staff. The two-day course I completed with the Better Beginnings team in WA had a huge impact on my understanding of early literacy and my confidence in developing and delivering library programming in this area and I would love to see something similar in NSW.”
Outreach Librarian, Hunter Region⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Djonov et al. (2017).

⁶⁹ From consultations with NSW library staff by The Insight Centre, 2023.

Best practice case studies of effective library literacy programs

Case studies of effective state-wide library literacy programs – Better Beginnings in Western Australia and the SPELL Program in Colorado, United States – have demonstrated the significant benefits of effective resourcing of state-wide literacy programming through libraries.

BETTER BEGINNINGS

Better Beginnings is a Western Australian family literacy program managed by the State Library in partnership with a number of other organisations. It aims to support parents to provide positive language and literacy for children by providing reading packs to families during maternal child health visits and encouraging attendance at 'baby rhyme time' and 'storytime' in libraries. The goal is to increase literacy and learning outcomes for all children in the state by encouraging families to read, talk, sing, write and play with their child every day. Better Beginnings provides literacy resources to families and carers, but also to practitioners including library staff, child health nurses and teachers.

An independent longitudinal evaluation assessed the impact of Better Beginnings on parents and carers approximately one year after they were introduced to the program. The evaluation found that the numbers of mothers reading to their babies increased from 49% prior to the program to 85% after receiving program resources. Mothers also reported an increase in the number of books suitable for reading to their child in their home since being exposed to program resources. Over two-thirds (70%) of the mothers reported that Better Beginnings had increased how often they read to their child. Interestingly, 70% of mothers stated that since using the Better Beginnings resources, their child's interest in books had changed. Of those, almost all (94%) reported that their child is now very interested or quite interested in books. Almost 60% of these mothers also reported an increase in how often their child requested a book to be read to them.⁷⁰

SUPPORTING PARENTS IN EARLY LITERACY THROUGH LIBRARIES (SPELL)

Supporting Parents in Early Literacy through Libraries (SPELL) is a research project that was developed by the Colorado State Library (United States) with researchers in 2012. The main aim of this initiative was to reach low-income parents of children aged 0–3 in order to facilitate the adoption of early literacy habits in the home.⁷¹ The program was run by eight libraries throughout Colorado in 2014 for one year. All programs were then evaluated and showed that, as a result of participating in the program, the participants' engagement in early literacy activities at home with their children had increased significantly, including reading, playing, singing and talking. Parents were also much more likely to indicate that they know how children learn to read, that they have a regular routine for reading books with their children, and that they are confident that they can help their children to be ready to learn to read in kindergarten.⁷²

70 Barratt-Pugh, C., & Allen, N. (2011). 'Making a difference: Findings from Better Beginnings a family literacy intervention programme'. *The Australian Library Journal*, 60(3), 195–204.

71 Colorado Department of Education (n.d.). SPELL: Tips and tools for early literacy programming targeting low-income families in your community. <http://spellproject.weebly.com/uploads/1/5/3/3/15331602/spelltoolkitfinal.pdf>.

72 Crist et al. (2020).

Conclusion

NSW public libraries are already making sustained and valuable efforts to support early literacy for children in the communities they serve.

However, most of the literacy services and programs they offer are run on shoestring budgets or ad hoc funding from councils or small grants. Without consistent state-wide policies, services and funding structures, libraries remain heavily under-utilised in the fight against the state's literacy declines. Without structured and consistent support, there is limited capacity for successful local library programs to be expanded to reach more people; nor can the impact of these programs be evaluated. There is also little capacity to upskill library staff.

There is clear evidence from other states, and internationally, that state-wide strategies and resourcing around library literacy programs generate enormous returns in terms of enhancing families' participation in the literacy activities that most benefit their children's brain development in the critical pre-school years.

States with robust library literacy initiatives like Western Australian (Better Beginnings) and Queensland (First 5 Forever) are well ahead of NSW in key benchmark literacy outcomes like PISA reading rankings. NSW needs strategic investment in library early literacy programs alongside other literacy initiatives to avoid falling further behind other states and territories.

Investing in NSW public libraries will equip these community hubs to leverage existing skills, programs and community connections to rise to the challenge of the literacy crisis. Particularly when resourced to build on existing strong community partnerships, libraries are ideally placed to reach a wide range of families, including those most marginalised and therefore at-risk of low literacy attainment.

Evidence from national and international evaluations and cost-benefit analyses of both libraries and literacy programs run through libraries make it clear that investment will show strong returns for the economy and the community in the long-term.

Public libraries are key players in increasing the literacy levels of NSW children and in ensuring the state is equipped to meet the social and workforce challenges of the twenty-first century. With a state-wide, strategic approach to resourcing, NSW libraries will be able to stem the worrying tide of literacy decline in the state.

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