



## Yvette Berry MLA

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Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development

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Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and  
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Mr Tom Duncan  
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Dear Mr Duncan

### Response to Petitions Nos 013-19 – Support for students with learning difficulties.

Thank you for your letter of 16 May 2019 about petition No 13-19 lodged by Ms Lee MLA and received in the Assembly on 16 May 2019.

I attach for your consideration a response to the petitions.

Yours sincerely

Yvette Berry MLA  
Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development

13 AUG 2019

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## RESPONSE TO PETITION NO: 013-19

### SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

#### Introduction

The ACT Government is strongly committed to meeting the learning needs of all students and giving children and young people the very best chance to reach their potential. This is clearly articulated in two key foundations of the Future of Education Strategy:

- placing students at the centre; and
- empowering teachers, school leaders and other professionals to thrive in a career of learning which meets the needs of all students.

The topic of best practice support and interventions for students with learning difficulties is highly contested and divided. Extensive debate over many years has often centred on schools' approaches to literacy instruction more broadly and is typically polarised around phonics instruction (the relationships between patterns of letters or graphemes and patterns of sound and phonemes). The debate in 2019 is not about phonics or no phonics in the teaching of reading and writing, but rather around the degree of emphasis of phonics in instruction and resources used to teach it. This has resulted in strong advocacy from stakeholders on both sides of the argument as evidenced by the current debate in relation to the Commonwealth Government's proposal to introduce a national year one phonics screening check. In the ACT, the Education Directorate's approach is to provide balanced literacy instruction to all students that recognises phonics as an essential component in building students' literacy skills but allows schools to draw on a range of strategies to teach reading.

Despite this debate there is broad agreement on the elements required to support improved outcomes for students with learning difficulties. This includes high quality teacher education, ongoing professional development for schools, early identification (including by teachers), assessment (by trained professionals such as psychologists) and evidence-based interventions by all stakeholders invested in the child's learning. Petition No 13-19, lodged in the ACT legislative Assembly on 16 May 2019 by Ms Elizabeth Lee MLA, makes reference to each of these important elements.

The ACT Government strongly refutes the Petitioners' suggestion that in 2019, students with learning difficulties are disadvantaged and do not have access to evidence-based literacy instruction, identification and interventions. The Education Directorate adopts a multifaceted approach to supporting students with learning difficulties that encompasses:

- Evidence-based literacy instruction, including ongoing professional development for educators and schools;
- Early identification of students with reading difficulties; and

- Support for students with reading difficulties, including access to educational psychologists and literacy specialists.

This approach has been informed by the valuable work commenced in 2014 in response to the Learning Difficulties Taskforce. Implementation of the Taskforce's recommendations led to the development of extensive resources and professional learning to promote understanding and awareness of Learning Difficulties and build capacity of schools to support students with Learning Difficulties, including students with a diagnosis of dyslexia. The strong foundation established through this work has been reinforced by the broad-ranging reforms stemming from the Schools for All program of cultural change focused on placing students with complex needs at the centre of their learning.

For example, funding provided in the 2016-17 ACT Budget enabled recruitment of an additional 26 full time staff to be engaged to deliver services, training and resources to support long-term educational outcomes for these students, and all students in ACT public schools. This led to an increase in the number of school psychologists and strengthening of the Network Student Engagement Team (NSET) through the addition of Allied Health workers including Speech-Language Pathologists. This has meant an expansion in universal supports available to schools, through professional learning packages designed for teachers and schools. NSET Allied Health workers also respond to schools' requests for support for individual students and are involved in consultations, observations, assessments, and providing support for schools around students' needs. NSET also includes two dedicated Inclusion Officers in each of the four networks, who provide specialised expertise to assist schools to meet the educational needs and wellbeing of students with disability (including students with learning difficulties).

The Schools for All program also included a strong focus on building capacity of teachers and learning support assistants to effectively support students with complex needs. This created extensive opportunities for school staff to build their awareness, understanding and skills in relation to supporting students with learning difficulties through relevant online and face to face professional learning. In 2018, 731 staff members engaged in the Online Training course "Understanding Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading" and 394 staff members engaged in the "Inclusion of learners with Speech, Language and Communication needs" course. Training recipients were primarily teachers in mainstream settings, along with a mix of specialist teachers, allied health officers, learning support assistants, school leaders and pre-service teachers.

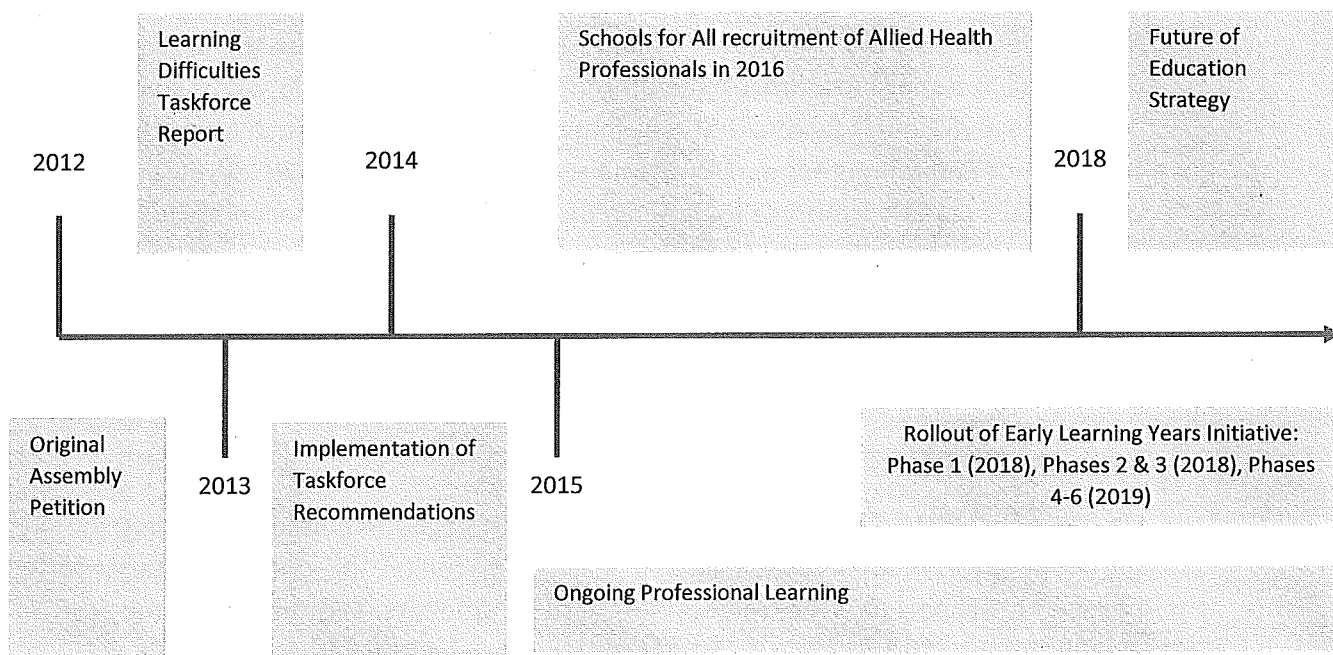
Following on from the Schools for All program, the ACT Education Directorate continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to literacy outcomes through ongoing professional learning on evidence-based literacy pedagogies available for all teachers and implementation of the Early Years Literacy Initiative (ELYI). This initiative was launched as a pilot with seven schools to focus on developing students' essential foundational skills in literacy across preschool to year 2 and has been significantly expanded. Across preschool to year 2 the EYLI is currently supporting 51 schools with 50 coaches, reaching 459 teachers, 153 school leaders and 8,568

students. Overall, the EYLI has also provided universal professional learning to 960 teachers in 2018 and 450 teachers in semester 1 2019.

The EYLI, which is continuing in 2019, is playing a critical role in strengthening teachers' knowledge, understanding and capacity to implement 10 essential instructional literacy practices in the early years. As the Education Directorate moves to implementation of the first phase of the Future of Education Strategy, this work will be complemented by pedagogy and curriculum activities that support increased personalised learning for students. For students with learning difficulties, this will support improved learning outcomes through ensuring objectives, approaches, content and tools are tailored and optimised for each learner.

This response provides a detailed overview of the Directorate's approach and demonstrates the sustained focus on meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties since the Learning Difficulties Taskforce was established in 2013. Figure 1 captures the key activities since 2012 that support an ongoing focus on meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties.

Figure 1: Timeline of activity



### **Learning difficulties and dyslexia – description and prevalence**

Dyslexia is a brain-based learning condition with a strong genetic component that typically results from a deficit in the phonological component of language. Phonological awareness is the ability to hear sounds that make up words in spoken language. Dyslexia is often not related to the cognitive abilities of a person.

Dyslexia is a term often used in the community to describe difficulties with reading. Clinicians use the term 'dyslexia' to describe a specific learning difficulty in the area of reading, which is associated with a variety of causes and symptoms. Diagnosing dyslexia requires evidence of at least six months of targeted reading interventions,

significant delay in reading compared to peers and the ruling out of other factors, such as an intellectual disability or sensory impairments (needs glasses or hearing aids).

Students with dyslexia may struggle with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and have poor spelling and decoding abilities. Unlike their peers, these difficulties do not diminish with maturity or through continual practice with reading.

Teaching students with dyslexia requires individualised/specialised or alternative approaches. Students with dyslexia have unique learning profiles and can have mild to significant learning needs depending on the severity of the condition. Strategies that work for one student may not work for another student.

Dyslexia can result in poor literacy development, which in turn can limit an individual's capacity to engage in learning. Poor literacy can lead to undesirable outcomes including: low self-esteem, social, emotional and behavioural problems and disengagement from education.

In Australia, the terms 'Specific/Significant Learning Difficulty/Disability' and 'Learning Difficulty' are used interchangeably and as an umbrella term for a variety of learning difficulties that may or may not be dyslexia.

Due to the inconsistent use of terminology, it is difficult to estimate the prevalence of dyslexia. It can also be difficult to differentiate between dyslexia, other learning difficulties and the risk factors that may impact learning to read, such as teaching that has not been targeted to meet the needs of the individual child; developmental trauma; lack of early exposure to reading; disadvantageous socio-economic circumstances; or a mix of these factors.

The Australian Dyslexia Association estimates that approximately 10 percent of the Australian population is affected by dyslexia. There are no figures available on the prevalence of dyslexia in the ACT.

### **Learning Difficulties Taskforce**

On 21 August 2012 a petition was tabled in the ACT Legislative Assembly calling for the Assembly to recognise Dyslexia as a 'learning disability' and enable assistance to be given to schools to effectively support dyslexic students. This resulted in the establishment of a Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties to provide recommendations for classroom level intervention, and support for children and young people in ACT public schools who have learning difficulties. The Taskforce provided a final report to the then ACT Minister for Education and Training, Ms Joy Burch in July 2013, identifying fourteen strategies under three key themes:

- A consistent systemic approach to maximise specific learning outcomes of students with Learning Difficulties;
- Building staff capacity to meet the needs of students with Learning Difficulties; and
- Partnerships with Families.

The Education Directorate's implementation of these strategies throughout 2014 led to the development of a comprehensive suite of professional learning packages and

resources for school leadership teams, teachers, learning support assistants, and parents/carers. For teaching staff this included development of a comprehensive online resource, the Learning Difficulties LIFE page, that continues to be accessible to school staff through the ACT Education Digital Backpack. The LIFE page is a repository for video presentations, templates, handouts and training videos to complement the professional learning package delivered at this time.

The *Learning Difficulties Teacher Online Resource* book continues to be valued by teaching staff, along with the ongoing professional learning package “Understanding Dyslexia and Significant Reading Difficulties”. To further build school capacity to support students with learning difficulties, each school identified a representative teacher to receive specialist training in learning difficulties, supported by school psychologists and field literacy and numeracy officers. A *Learning Difficulties Good Practice Guide* was also developed for school psychologists outlining a comprehensive psycho-education assessment protocol, available assessment tools, and supporting resources and a Response to Intervention Pilot Study was undertaken in selected schools.

Targeted workshops were delivered to parents and carers and a range of resources were developed for families. A review was also undertaken of the Gifted and Talented Student Policy to include “dual exceptionality” (that is gifted students who also present with one or more specific learning difficulties; physical, emotional or behavioural disabilities; or other factors which may impair performance and mask high potential). All of these resources continue to be available on the Education Directorate’s website.

Senior psychologists will be presenting the “Understanding Learning Difficulties” face to face workshop in terms 3 and 4 this year. It is intended that these workshops will continue to be available each term.

### **Evidence based literacy instruction in ACT schools**

All ACT public schools use evidence-based literacy approaches to support their students’ education needs. Currently in the ACT, the Directorate’s approach is to provide balanced literacy instruction to all students to ensure equity of outcomes, and as such schools focus on a range of strategies to teach reading.

The ACT Government recognises phonics is an essential component in building students’ literacy skills. This includes the teaching of phonics knowledge and word recognition as part of the Australian Curriculum. The explicit and systematic teaching of phonics and phonological awareness is provided through the use of connected texts and rich engaging reading and writing experiences.

Explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary and comprehension are very important to reading and are included within the Early Years Literacy Initiative (EYLI). The EYLI also includes oral language as a key to effective reading. Current research demonstrates that morphological instruction (that is, the recognition, understanding, and use of word parts that carry significance - this includes identifying the root word, any prefixes, suffixes, and grammatical inflections) needs to be systematically and explicitly taught alongside phonics instruction. All of these elements are encompassed in the EYLI and the place of

phonemic awareness and phonics can be noted in particular in Practices #4 and #5 of the 10 Essential Instructional Practices for Literacy:

- Practice #4- Activities that build phonological awareness
- Practice #5- Explicit instruction in letter-sound relationships.

Ms Christine Topfer, a teacher and educational consultant, has been engaged by the Education Directorate to provide both intensive in-school professional learning and support and leadership capability development through a masterclass series to the participating schools.

The EYLI promotes the use of abundant reading material and reading opportunities in the classroom. This includes high quality texts that both motivate and engage young readers and support their developing reading skills. In addition to 'trade' picture and information books, there are quality learning to read books made by Australian educational publishers that meet this need well. Many high-quality texts contain the same elements of decodable readers that support the development of phonological and phonemic awareness (rhythm, rhyme, repetition) and can be used as resources in the explicit and systematic teaching of phonics while also teaching the joy of reading. While the 'Decodable Readers' associated with some phonics commercial programs may form a small part of a school's library of reading resources, they should not be the main resource presented to children to support their reading development and the ACT Education Directorate does not support mandating decodable readers.

All schools, regardless of whether they are part of the intensive consultancy program, are able to access the various universal professional learning associated with the EYLI. These universal professional learning opportunities include "Phonological Awareness and Interactive Writing K – 2", "10 Essential Practices in Preschool", "Writing K-3", "Comprehension K-3" and "Word Conscious Classroom". New workshops this year include "Supporting Striving Readers and Writers" (primary schools) and "Supporting Struggling Adolescent Readers and Writers" for secondary schools. All EYLI professional learning for teachers is accredited by the ACT Teacher Quality Institute.

Workshops on "Supporting Striving Readers and Writers" focus on a range of instructional strategies that may support students with a dyslexia diagnosis or any processing issue that makes reading and writing more of a challenge. The workshop covers ways to ensure these strategies are included in a student's individual learning plan (ILP) to meet individual learning goals that are clearly aligned to a student's learning needs and which are time bound and measurable. ILP processes in schools are overseen by school leaders and include the identification of specific adjustments that may include using assistive technology, a scribe, providing additional time, along with specific instructional strategies to target each student's identified learning needs. An ILP can be requested by either the family or the school if there are concerns for the child's/young person's development.

The Australian Curriculum provides guidance on personalised learning for principals and teachers to support them in meeting the diverse needs of all students, including those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia. For students identified as having

learning difficulties, teachers must be able to identify, plan and tailor the teaching and learning program to meet the needs of individual students. For students with dyslexia, for example, this could involve use of assistive technologies such as text to speech and voice recognition software, iPads, tablets and digital recorders.

The Australian Curriculum Literacy Learning Progressions is a resource that outlines the developmental stages in literacy, including but not limited to phonological awareness, phonic knowledge and word knowledge. Specific training is being offered through the Directorate to assist teachers to apply these progression tools to support students' literacy learning in the classroom.

The Education Directorate continues to strengthen its relationship with the University of Canberra to ensure the provision of appropriate, evidence-based pre-service and post-graduate teaching courses and professional learning opportunities. Content on teaching children to read is integrated into literacy units over the four year teaching degree. Additionally, the schools involved in the Early Years Literacy Initiative have expert teachers and leaders identified by their principals to participate in ongoing targeted professional learning as literacy coaches to build their knowledge about all aspects of literacy, language and assessment.

### **Early identification of students with reading difficulties**

The ACT Government has a strong commitment to meeting the diverse learning needs of all students. For students showing signs of struggling with reading and writing, the Education Directorate recognises that early identification, planning and tailoring of the teaching and learning program is critical for facilitating positive literacy outcomes.

The professional learning provided through the EYLI builds teacher capability in literacy assessments that include screening, diagnostic and formative assessments and rigorous tracking and monitoring systems. The Early Years Literacy team with the support of consultant Christine Topfer has collated a quality assured set of literacy assessment tools and monitoring schedules for schools to access. The Education Directorate is working with schools to implement these assessments. These assist classroom teachers to identify where individual children and young people are in their literacy and language learning. These include tools to assess:

- Concepts About Print
- Phonological Awareness
- Alphabet Knowledge
- Reading (multiple aspects)
- Spelling (multiple aspects)
- High Frequency words
- Writing; and
- Oral language.

In addition, all ACT public schools administer the Performance Indicators in Primary School (PIPS) to students at the beginning and end of the Kindergarten year. Kindergarten and year one teachers are able to utilise this data to support planning



for student learning. Teachers and school leaders are provided with training support to maximise their understanding of the results.

PIPS also assists in the identification of students who may be struggling with aspects of literacy and assists teachers to tailor instruction for all students, including phonics, and to tailor literacy instruction using a range of targeted strategies and adjustments. The ACT Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties determined that, as a measure, PIPS highly correlated with the Dynamic Indicators of Early Basic Literacy Skills test (DIBELS). DIBELS is a universal screening tool for identification of reading disabilities including dyslexia.

The Education Directorate's suite of assessments is more comprehensive and finer grained than the proposed Year 1 Phonics Check and provides a wealth of information on a child's reading behaviours at regular intervals to support teachers to plan targeted teaching and learning. The ACT Government is concerned that implementing the proposed National Year 1 Phonics Check would provide negligible additional information for teachers, schools and systems to improve early detection, differentiate instruction and support literacy acquisition.

Learning disabilities such as dyslexia are defined by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* as 'a disorder or malfunction that results in a person learning differently from a person without a disorder or malfunction'. Students with learning disabilities are a specific group who are considered to have learning difficulties but do not respond to appropriate intervention. The *Disability Standards for Education 2005* requires schools to make reasonable adjustments to ensure these students are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. This requires teachers to exercise professional judgement, in consultation with the student and their family.

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability (NCCD), introduced across Australia in 2015, supports teachers to identify students who require educational adjustments to support their additional learning needs. NCCD provides an annual collection of information about Australian school students who are receiving adjustments due to disability. It requires schools to be able to demonstrate evidence of educational adjustments provided to meet ongoing, long-term specific needs associated with disability that have a functional impact on the student's schooling. Evidence may include teacher judgements based on observation, specialist diagnosis reports, individualised/personalised learning planning such as an ILP, records of assessments, and records of discussions with parents, guardians or carers and (if appropriate) the student as part of the process for determining and providing adjustments. The NCCD enables schools, education authorities and governments to better understand the needs of students with disability and how they can be best supported at school. It reinforces best practice in learning and support systems, supporting a better understanding of the functional needs of students with disability and developing professional judgement to inform appropriate educational adjustments. A comprehensive web portal provides teachers from across Australia with access to rich resources including, for example, a podcast on classroom adjustments for specific learning needs (dyslexia) and case studies of students with learning difficulties.

The Education Directorate supports schools and families to identify individual student needs and any required adjustments. Reasonable adjustments may include use of assistive technologies such as text to speech and voice recognition software, iPads, tablets and digital recorders and predictive text applications for writing and visual supports and/or intensive one-to-one teaching intervention using a structured personalised approach to teaching phonics.

The Google Suite of applications for education, accessible to all ACT public school students, includes functionality such as Read&Write for Google Chrome which automatically reads text to students and can capture speech and turn it into text. There are also apps that will convert handwriting to characters. Although available to all students, these features are particularly beneficial in supporting students with learning difficulties. All students in an ACT public school in years 7 to 11 receive a Chromebook integrated with this G suite for Education. The provision of note-takers and/or assistive technologies might be provided for assessments tasks where appropriate.

The documentation of planning and implementation of adjustments for students, for example in an ILP, is particularly valuable in supporting effective transitions for students when they are moving from one educational setting to another.

### **Support for students with reading difficulties, access to educational psychologists and literacy specialists**

ACT public schools have a range of support mechanisms for students who are demonstrating difficulties with learning, including dyslexia. This includes access for every ACT public school to educational psychologists and literacy specialists qualified in evidence-based literacy instruction and provision of qualified professionals such as speech pathologists and literacy specialists for students requiring such support during school hours. The ongoing professional learning and support provided for the literacy coaches across EYLI schools increases the access to in-school literacy specialists.

The school psychology service can assist school staff to support students with reading difficulties and may complement the teacher's data with additional assessment to better understand areas of strength and areas of concerns. School psychologists can help determine the presence of learning difficulties (difficulty in an academic area but not yet clear if a student will meet diagnostic criteria for learning disorder) or a Specific Learning Disorder.

School psychologists may initially be involved in supporting a school to implement a response to intervention (RTI) model, assisting the class teacher in the planning of curriculum-based assessments and interventions to help meet the learning needs of students. This may include whole class (Tier 1) and additional small group (Tier 2) approaches. If students need more targeted support (Tier 3), a psychologist can assist the teachers and school leaders in a case management approach with teachers to develop highly targeted additional intervention and assessment related to literacy.

One of the components of the Early Years Literacy Initiative (EYLI) is training coaches, or literacy specialists, in each participating school. By the end of 2019 there will be

51 schools engaged in the initiative, thus at least 51 literacy coaches in 51 schools, with many of the participating schools having two or more trained coaches. The coaches are available to support all teachers in their school strengthen their literacy practices.

As part of the EYLI, there are also five instructional mentors who are experienced school leaders who support the school-based literacy coaches in implementing and embedding the evidence-based teaching practices in schools. The instructional mentors support all schools across the preschool, early childhood, primary and secondary sectors.

The Network Student Engagement Team (NSET) employs speech pathologists who can support schools to address students' learning and development needs and are also able to consider factors that contribute to learning difficulties such as phonological awareness and language skills. NSETs role is to build school and teacher capacity and the speech language pathology team currently offer professional learning and collaborative planning with schools in the areas of early identification and evidence-based supports in several areas including language and the relationship between oral language and literacy skills.

Speech language pathologists are contributing to assisting teachers to build quality literacy practices. They are involved in the Early Years Oral Language/Literacy Initiative and provide capacity building through consultation and in-servicing to schools which includes information about the scope and sequence of phonics teaching as well as enhancing understanding of oral language and literacy links. NSET speech language pathologists are also contributing to Tier 2 interventions, for example, by contributing to data collection and assessment and assisting with tailoring of oral language and phonological awareness support for small groups of students usually facilitated by an Allied Health Assistant and school staff.

### **Conclusion**

The ACT Government, through the Future of Education Strategy, continues to maintain a focus on meeting the wellbeing and learning needs of all students by placing students at the centre of their learning; empowering teachers, school leaders and other professionals to thrive in a career of learning that meets the needs of all students; building strong communities for learning and systems that support learning. This includes a focus on meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties, including dyslexia, through ongoing professional development for schools, access to specialist expertise and evidence-based literacy instruction. The Education Directorate's active engagement in this space is evidenced by the ACT Government's significant investment in strengthening specialist support for students and schools available through the Network Student Engagement Team and the School Psychology Service and the implementation of the Early Years Literacy Years Initiative that commenced in 2017. The Education Directorate has strong foundations in place to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties and continues to build on these foundations through ongoing professional learning for staff, strengthened relationships with the University of Canberra and a future

focused approach to personalised learning that connects young people with their learning.