Submission cover sheet

Inquiry into E-PET-078-25 and PET-041-26: Make career guidance a right for every ACT Year 7–10 public school student

Submission number: 001

Submitter: ACT Children and Young People Commissioner

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Inquiry into E-Petition 078-25 and Petition 041-26: Make career guidance a right for every ACT Year 7-10 public school student

September 2026

Role of the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner

The ACT Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) is one of nine independent statutory roles that together make up the ACT Human Rights Commission. These roles promote the human rights and welfare of all people living in the ACT and have legislative responsibility for protecting some of Canberra's most vulnerable citizens.

The role of the CYPC is to:

- Promote the rights, safety, and wellbeing of children and young people
- Consult and talk with children and young people and promote their participation in decision-making
- Ensure stakeholders listen to and seriously consider the views of children and young people
- Promote implementation of the ACT Child Safe Standards, and
- Provide advice to government and community agencies about how to improve services for children and young people.

The CYPC is also the ACT Public Advocate.

Opening statement

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. My office regularly engages with children and young people across a range of settings, and they frequently raise their experiences of school with us. Many young people speak about whether their education is preparing them for adulthood and for the opportunities and challenges they will face beyond school.

This submission draws on the views and experiences shared directly with us by children and young people in the ACT, alongside relevant research and evidence relating to education. The quotes included throughout the submission reflect what young people have told us over the past four years, about a range of issues affecting their educational experiences.

I support the recognition of career guidance as an important component of a quality education. Access to educational and vocational guidance is already recognised under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and applies to all children and young people in the ACT, regardless of the school system in which they are enrolled.

While the petition highlights a significant gap in the ACT's fulfilment of children's rights in education, career guidance is only one aspect of a broader issue. Children and young people consistently identify concerns that extend beyond career planning, including whether their education is developing the knowledge, skills, capabilities, and supports they need to thrive.

The CRC envisages an education system that meets a wide range of developmental, social, and participatory goals, and young people tell us that many of these are not yet being fully realised.

For this reason, while I welcome the focus on career guidance, it is my view that a broader consideration of how well the ACT education system is meeting children's rights and preparing young people for their futures is needed. This submission begins a discussion about the extent to which education in the ACT is delivering on its wider purpose and obligations to children and young people.

Recommendations

1. **Embed a child rights framework in education policy**
   - Legislate and operationalise a Child Rights–Based Approach (CRBA) across all ACT education laws, funding agreements, and national strategies.
   - Require Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) for all education-related policy, legislation, and budget decisions.

2. **Prioritise children's participation in decision-making**
   - Establish mechanisms for meaningful participation of children and young people in education policy design, inquiries, and reforms.
   - Require all reforms to demonstrate how student views and perspectives have informed decisions.

3. **Review curriculum relevance in partnership with students**
   - Undertake a review of the ACT curriculum to assess whether it is equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities they need to navigate adulthood, further education, training, and employment.
   - Ensure the review is informed by direct consultation with children and young people and reflects their priorities and lived experiences.

4. **Strengthen practical life-skills learning across the curriculum**
   - Increase opportunities for students to develop practical life skills, including financial literacy, wellbeing, and independent living skills.
   - Expand access to applied and hands-on learning opportunities that support exploration of different career pathways.

5. **Strengthen career guidance as part of a holistic approach to student engagement and wellbeing**
   - Recognise career guidance as a core component of quality education and student wellbeing, rather than a standalone service.
   - Integrate career education with wellbeing, inclusion, and student support services.
   - Ensure reforms to career guidance are accompanied by broader efforts to improve student wellbeing, engagement, and educational outcomes across the ACT school system.

6. **Establish a broader review of student engagement and educational relevance in ACT schools**
   - Building on the findings of this Inquiry, previous education inquiries, and the CYPC attendance consultation, undertake a review of how effectively ACT schools are engaging and supporting students.
   - The review should be informed directly by children and young people and examine the relationship between career guidance, curriculum relevance, wellbeing, attendance, and school engagement.

The right to education

The UNCRC enshrines the right to education in Articles 28 and 29, which require all appropriate measures to be taken to ensure education:

- is accessible to every child
- supports the development of the child's full mental and physical abilities
- develops a respect for human rights and freedoms
- fosters the connection to the child's culture, language, and values, and
- develops a respect for the environment.

The UNCRC recognises children have the right to an education that supports their full development across cognitive, social, emotional, and cultural dimensions. Article 29 emphasises that education must be directed to the development of each child's personality, talents, and abilities to their fullest potential.

When reviewing how well the ACT is meeting these obligations, it is important to view education holistically. The rights set out in the UNCRC are interconnected and cannot be realised through isolated policy responses. Issues such as career guidance, attendance, wellbeing, inclusion, disability support, student participation, and curriculum relevance are closely linked and should be considered together. A siloed approach risks addressing individual symptoms rather than the underlying factors affecting children's educational experiences and outcomes.

Career guidance

Under Article 28, States must:

> "...make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children."[1]

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) recognises access to educational and vocational guidance as part of the right to education. Career guidance should be universally accessible, non-discriminatory, and designed to help children and young people develop their talents, make informed choices about education and work, and realise their full potential.

Education budgeting

The UNCRC requires governments to allocate resources to support the realisation of children's rights. Article 4 obliges governments to use the maximum available resources to fulfil children's economic, social, and cultural rights.

[1] United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 28(1)(d) https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

The Committee emphasises that child-rights-based budgeting:

- contributes to the realisation of rights
- strengthens long-term economic and social outcomes, and
- supports sustainable and inclusive development.

To do so requires the undertaking of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) when developing legislation, policy, guidelines, programs, and services. These assessments would ensure children's rights are upheld by government spending and enable a transparent analysis of how children's best interests are being supported by proposed spending or programming.

> "Every State should consider how it can ensure compliance with article 3 (1) [best interest of the child] and do so in a way which further promotes the visible integration of children in policy-making and sensitivity to their rights."[2]

The Committee calls for governments to use CRIAs at all levels of decision-making, so that government obligations are upheld in the implementation of policy and legislation.

Recommendation

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[2] GENERAL COMMENT No. 5 (2003), General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6), 2003:11

Children and young people's perspectives

> *"I hate that adults don't listen to me."*
>
> *"I want adults to know that when I'm frustrated no one listens to me."*

Any efforts to fully understand student experiences of education should consider the perspectives of children and young people who are currently moving through their education. This necessitates hearing from children and young people themselves.

Article 12 of the UNCRC affirms that children and young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. This not only includes decisions relating directly to their individual circumstances, but also policies, frameworks, and legislation that affect children and young people as a cohort and as citizens.

Seeking out children and young people's perspectives about career guidance and how their education is preparing them for the future would therefore support ACT's commitment to, and obligations under, the UNCRC.

Hearing from children and young people themselves provides an important and invariably different perspective to that of adults, and one that benefits our consideration of matters such as those that are the subject of this Inquiry.

To this end, if you have not already done so, I encourage the Committee to establish appropriate mechanisms to enable children and young people to contribute to your Inquiry and, in doing so, enhance your understanding about what it is currently like to be a student in an Australian school.

Recommendation

2. **Prioritise children's participation in decision-making**
    - Establish mechanisms for meaningful participation of children and young people in education policy design, inquiries, and reforms.
    - Require all reforms to demonstrate how student views and perspectives have informed decisions.

Curriculum relevance

Children and young people consistently tell me that they want education to be more relevant to the realities of adult life.

> *"Teach me life skills, integration into adult life."*
>
> *"How to do taxes"*
>
> *"Support students who want to start their own business."*

When asked what schools should teach, students commonly identify practical skills such as financial literacy, including how to set up a bank account, handle their taxes, and other aspects of navigating adulthood. They also call for greater access to hands-on learning opportunities such as woodwork, metalwork, and cooking, which they see as providing both valuable life skills and insight into potential career pathways.

These views highlight that career guidance is not solely the responsibility of career practitioners. The curriculum itself plays an important role in helping students understand the skills, knowledge, and capabilities they will need beyond school. This is in line with guidance from the Committee, which states that:

> "Education must also be aimed at ensuring that essential life skills are learnt by every child and that no child leaves school without being equipped to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life."[3]

Learning experiences that are practical, applied, and connected to real-world opportunities can help students see the relevance of their education and make more informed decisions about their futures.

> *"Sex-ed, not shaming kids. Adequate teaching with knowledgeable teachers."*
>
> *"More focus on health and fitness, more PE in schools, choice of PE."*
>
> *"I want some classes that teach kids real life problems."*
>
> *"Make mental health part of curriculum."*

[3] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2001). *General comment No. 1 (2001): The aims of education (Article 29(1))* (CRC/GC/2001/1). United Nations. https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g01/412/53/pdf/g0141253.pdf

Young people also want schools to better prepare them for the personal and social challenges they will face. Students told us they want stronger teaching on mental health, health and fitness, and relationship and sexuality education delivered by knowledgeable teachers. Their feedback suggests that preparation for adulthood extends beyond employment and includes wellbeing, financial independence, relationships, and participation in the community.

The consistent message from young people is that the curriculum needs to keep pace with their needs and the challenges they will face both during school and after they leave. Career guidance should therefore be considered alongside curriculum design that equips students to enter further education, training, or employment, and to successfully navigate adult life more broadly.

Recommendations

3. **Review curriculum relevance in partnership with students**
    - Undertake a review of the ACT curriculum to assess whether it is equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities they need to navigate adulthood, further education, training, and employment.
    - Ensure the review is informed by direct consultation with children and young people and reflects their priorities and lived experiences.

4. **Strengthen practical life-skills learning across the curriculum**
    - Increase opportunities for students to develop practical life skills, including financial literacy, wellbeing, and independent living skills.
    - Expand access to applied and hands-on learning opportunities that support exploration of different career pathways.

Wellbeing and student engagement

> *"Schools focusing on mental health and having trained psychologists."*
>
> *"Schools should have trained psychologists not just counsellors."*

Children and young people consistently tell us their experiences of wellbeing, engagement and support at school shape how they think about their futures. Many describe feeling overwhelmed by academic pressure, uncertainty about life after school, and a lack of support to navigate the increasingly complex education, training, and employment pathways available to them.

> *"School avoidance issues are major. I wish adults knew how much the state of the world affects all aspects of students' lives."*
>
> *"There is a stigma around seeking help within school, which can influence students to not seek help and therefore negatively impacts their mental wellbeing and their ability to achieve at their maximum throughout school."*
>
> *"Excessive schoolwork can lead to an overall decline in academic performance, as stressed students struggle to concentrate and work as hard."*

The evidence consistently shows that mental health and developmental wellbeing are closely linked to educational engagement and attainment. Children and young people who experience anxiety, psychological distress, exclusion, or barriers to accessing support are more likely to disengage from learning and to experience difficulties planning for and transitioning into further education, training, and employment.

Career guidance should be understood within this broader context. Effective career development is not simply about helping students select subjects or identify future occupations. It provides young people with opportunities to explore their strengths, interests and aspirations, understand the pathways available to them, and build confidence about their future. When delivered well, career guidance can improve engagement with learning by helping students see the relevance of their education and connect current studies with future goals.

Inclusion

This is particularly important for groups of young people who face structural barriers to educational participation and attainment. A rights-based approach to career guidance requires that all students, including those with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, LGBTQIA+ students, and students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, can access guidance that is inclusive, responsive, and tailored to their circumstances.

Students with disability have significantly lower rates of labour force participation and employment than their peers.[4] Evidence indicates that career development, workplace preparation, vocational training, and supported school-to-work transitions improve employment outcomes for young people with disability.

The ACT Government has already recognised the importance of these supports through its response to the Disability Royal Commission.[5] Ensuring access to qualified career practitioners in ACT schools would therefore have particular benefits for students with disability, who often face additional barriers in navigating education, training, and employment pathways.

Our engagement with children and young people suggests that career guidance will be most effective when it is embedded within a broader framework that promotes student wellbeing, engagement, inclusion, and participation. Increasing access to qualified career practitioners should therefore form part of a wider effort to ensure all ACT students are supported to develop the knowledge, skills, confidence, and aspirations they need to thrive beyond school.

Recommendation

5. **Strengthen career guidance as part of a holistic approach to student engagement and wellbeing**
    - Recognise career guidance as a core component of quality education and student wellbeing, rather than a standalone service.
    - Integrate career education with wellbeing, inclusion and student support services.
    - Ensure reforms to career guidance are accompanied by broader efforts to improve student wellbeing, engagement and educational outcomes across the ACT school system.

[4] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *People with Disability in Australia 2024: Employment* (Canberra: AIHW, 2024)
[5] Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. (2025). *Recommendation 7.5: Careers guidance and transition support services*. In *Disability Royal Commission progress report 2025: Volume 7, Inclusive education, employment and housing.* Australian Government.

Consultation on school attendance

As the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner, my office is currently partnering with the Education Directorate to undertake a significant consultation with children and young people about school attendance challenges in the ACT. This work was initiated in response to growing concerns about increasing rates of school attendance difficulties, inconsistency in responses across schools, and a lack of child-centred evidence about the drivers of disengagement and non-attendance. A key objective of the consultation is to ensure that the voices and experiences of children and young people directly inform future policy and practice responses.

The consultation is based on a clear finding from both our preliminary work and the broader evidence base: children and young people's perspectives are largely absent from discussions about school attendance. Research undertaken by my office found a significant gap in ACT-specific evidence informed by student experiences and highlighted the risk that policies developed without student input may fail to address the realities of young people's lives. The consultation has therefore been designed as a rights-based process that centres children's participation and lived experience.

> *[School is] "sometimes a bit useless."*

Importantly, our work to date suggests that school attendance cannot be understood in isolation from broader questions of student engagement, wellbeing and educational relevance. Previous engagement with more than 400 students identified a range of factors contributing to disengagement, including mental health challenges, bullying, discrimination, inadequate support for students with disability, stress, and a lack of safety and belonging at school.

> *"It's not built for diverse teaching styles/options and only accommodates for neurotypical kids."*

Students consistently emphasised the importance of positive relationships, inclusive environments and learning experiences that feel meaningful and relevant to their lives.

> *"the path to my future to bring in money and live financially stable."*

The findings of this consultation are likely to be highly relevant to the issues raised by this Inquiry. While access to career guidance is an important element of educational engagement and preparation for adulthood, it is only one aspect of a broader set of factors that influence whether young people feel connected to school and optimistic about their futures.

We encourage the ACT Government to consider the outcomes of this consultation alongside any reforms arising from this Inquiry, as it will provide a unique child-centred evidence base on what children and young people themselves believe needs to change to improve engagement, attendance, and educational outcomes in the ACT.

Recommendations

6. **Establish a broader review of student engagement and educational relevance in ACT schools**
    - Building on the findings of this Inquiry, previous education inquiries and the CYPC attendance consultation, undertake a review of how effectively ACT schools are engaging and supporting students.
    - The review should be informed directly by children and young people and examine the relationship between career guidance, curriculum relevance, wellbeing, attendance and school engagement.

Closing comments

Access to career guidance is a recognised component of the right to education and can play a significant role in helping students understand their strengths, explore opportunities, and navigate transitions into further education, training, and employment. Improving access to qualified career practitioners, particularly for students in Years 7 to 10, would be a positive step towards better supporting young people as they plan for their futures.

However, the evidence presented in this submission suggests that career guidance should not be considered in isolation. The children and young people we speak to consistently identify broader concerns about the relevance of their education, their preparedness for adult life, their wellbeing, and their sense of connection to school. They want practical life skills, pathways that reflect diverse futures, stronger wellbeing supports, and learning that helps them navigate an increasingly complex world. Career guidance is one important response to these concerns, but it is not the whole solution.

Our current consultation on school attendance challenges further reinforces the need to consider these issues together. Early engagement indicates that attendance, engagement, wellbeing, inclusion, school climate, relationships, and students' perceptions of their future opportunities are closely interconnected. The consultation is being undertaken because there is currently a significant gap in child-centred evidence about why students disengage from school and what they believe would help them remain connected to education.

This Inquiry presents an opportunity not only to strengthen career guidance in ACT schools, but also to consider how the education system can better support children and young people holistically so they can engage with learning and prepare for adulthood.