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

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

Australian Education Union – ACT Branch submission
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Introduction

The Australian Education Union ACT Branch supports the petitioners' request that every ACT public school with Years 7–10 employs a professionally qualified career practitioner. The AEU represents teachers, school leaders, school assistants and school psychologists in ACT public schools, including staff who currently deliver careers education and guidance, often alongside a full teaching load.

The Committee has said it wants to "better understand possible pathways to improve access to appropriate career advice for students at this age level."[1] This submission is intended to help with that task. Our central point is that access to career guidance in ACT high schools is uneven because of how the system is resourced. Whether a student can see a qualified career practitioner currently depends on whether their principal can find room for the position in a school budget that is already under pressure. The pathway to universal access is to make career practitioners part of a guaranteed, system-funded minimum staffing structure for every school.

This position is consistent with the claim for a guaranteed minimum staffing structure that the AEU has put forward in enterprise bargaining, which names career practitioners in secondary and college settings as one of the roles every school should be guaranteed. It also aligns with the direction set by the ACT Public School System Resourcing Review, which recommended that the ACT move from a system of largely autonomous schools to a single, coordinated public education system.[2]

In this submission we set out why career guidance matters in the high school years, how the current arrangements produce unequal access, and offer six recommendations for the Committee.

Why career guidance matters in Years 7–10

The high school years are when students make the first decisions that shape their pathways after school. In the ACT this is sharpened by the college system. At the end of Year 10 every public school student moves to a new setting, chooses a college, and selects a package of Tertiary, Accredited, vocational or school-based apprenticeship options. Colleges differ in the

[1] Thomas Emerson MLA in "Media release: New inquiry into E-Petition 078-25 and PET-41-26", Standing Committee on Social Policy, Legislative Assembly for the ACT, 2 September 2026.

[2] ACT Public School System Resourcing Review Expert Panel, Supporting the delivery of an effective and equitable public education system in the ACT: Final report, 2 April 2026, Recommendation 1.

courses, languages and vocational programs they offer. Some university courses require particular areas of study to have been taken in Year 11-12. A Year 10 student who has not had informed guidance can close off options before they reach college, sometimes without realising it.

International evidence supports early and sustained career development. OECD analysis of longitudinal data across several countries has found that teenagers who explore and think about their future careers while at school tend to have better employment outcomes as young adults.[3] The same research shows that students from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to have access to these experiences through family networks, which makes the school's role more important for them.

The national peak body for careers advisers, the Career Industry Council of Australia, has called for a professionally qualified career practitioner in every secondary school so that career development is built into the education system rather than left to chance.[4] The ratio the petitioners propose, 1 FTE practitioner to 450 students, is the same ratio recommended by the Victorian Parliament's 2018 inquiry into career advice activities in schools and supported by CICA.[5]

Career guidance is also connected to engagement. Students who can see where their learning leads are more likely to stay engaged with school. For students at risk of disengaging in education, a qualified practitioner who can connect them with vocational pathways, school-based apprenticeships or the right college program can make the difference between leaving school early and completing Year 12.

The current situation

The petitions before the Committee report that 13 of the 22 ACT public schools with Years 7–10 do not employ a qualified career practitioner, and that three in five Year 7–10 public school students do not have access to one at their school. These figures are consistent with what AEU members report. In many high schools, careers work is done by a teacher who may have been given a small allocation of time for it on top of their classes, or may be expected to complete the function on top of an entire teaching load. Sometimes the role is undertaken by staff who have no career development qualification. In some schools, as noted by the petitioners, the function cannot be met at all.

The contrast with colleges is instructive. The Resourcing Review describes the Student Resource Allocation (SRA), the formula used to fund ACT public schools, as including funding

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[3] Anthony Mann, Vanessa Denis and Chris Percy, *Career Ready? How schools can better prepare young people for working life in the era of COVID-19*, OECD Education Working Papers No. 241, OECD Publishing, 2020, pp.8-9.

[4] Career Industry Council of Australia, "Career Industry Council of Australia supports call for career practitioners in every secondary school", media release, 29 January 2025.

[5] Parliament of Victoria, Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee, *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools*, 2018; Career Industry Council of Australia, submission to the Victorian Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-Demand Industries, 30 July 2025.

for programs specific to particular school types, and gives "careers support for colleges" as an example.[6] The system has already accepted that careers support in colleges is a core function that should be funded. There is no equivalent allocation for high schools. A high school that wants a qualified career practitioner must fund the position from its general staffing budget, in competition with every other demand on that budget.

It is worth noting that at the time of making this submission, many schools face significant budget cuts for the 2027 school year, as reported in the media throughout September 2026. The Committee should understand that for schools where careers guidance is currently resourced, this may soon change, as schools are forced to make difficult decisions to meet budget expectations. This would be to the detriment of thousands of young Canberrans.

The Committee may be told that schools are free to employ career practitioners if they choose. That is true, and it is the source of the problem. When a function is optional and unfunded, access to it depends on the circumstances of each school rather than the needs of each student. We encourage the Committee to ask the Education Directorate how many qualified career practitioners it currently employs in high schools, in which schools, at what FTE, and how these positions are funded. If the Directorate cannot answer those questions, it cannot credibly claim to be providing career guidance to high school students.

Access depends on individual school budgets

The uneven provision of career guidance is one example of a broader pattern in ACT public education. The system sets expectations of what schools will deliver, and then leaves each principal to decide whether their budget can stretch to deliver it. Responsibility is devolved to schools, but the resources to meet that responsibility are not guaranteed. The AEU made the same point in its recent submission to this Committee's inquiry into Year 11–12 ATAR language courses, where language provision had been left to individual schools with predictable results for equity.[7]

The Resourcing Review reached a similar conclusion about the system as a whole. The Expert Panel found that the ACT's legacy of school autonomy had set schools up to operate "much like independent small businesses rather than in a coordinated and cooperative way", and that recent budget pressures are often downstream symptoms of deeper structural issues in how the system is organised and resourced.[8] It recommended that the ACT shift to a single public education system that delivers "unity, consistency and coordination", and the Government has committed to this shift.[9]

The budget pressure on schools is significant. A principal who wants to employ a career practitioner must weigh the position against classroom teachers, learning support roles,

[6] Resourcing Review final report, section 2.2.2.1.

[7] AEU ACT Branch, Inquiry into E-Petition 077-25: Access to 11–12 ATAR language courses in 2026, submission, March 2026.

[8] Resourcing Review final report, section 5.3.1.1.

[9] ACT Government, Future of Education: One public education system – Interim Government response to the ACT Public School System Resourcing Review, 2026.

wellbeing staff and relief. Principals are making reasonable decisions within the constraints they face. The result is that some students have access to a qualified career practitioner and most do not.

The Panel also found that access to private income sources is uneven across the system, allowing some schools to fund programs that others cannot, which compounds inequity.[10] Where a service depends on discretionary school funding, the schools best placed to provide it are often not the schools whose students would benefit most. Students whose families have professional networks and knowledge of post-school pathways already have an advantage. Students without those networks depend more heavily on what their school provides.

The petitioners recognise this. Their third request asks the Government to provide additional funding for schools "in recognition of budget pressures currently facing public schools in the ACT." The AEU agrees. A requirement to employ career practitioners that is not accompanied by dedicated funding would simply add another unfunded obligation to school budgets, and principals would be forced to cut something else to meet it.

Qualifications, workforce planning and the career practitioner role

Career development is a professional field with its own standards and qualifications. A qualified career practitioner brings current knowledge of the labour market, tertiary admissions, vocational pathways and apprenticeships, along with training in guiding young people through decisions about their future. Careers education delivered by a well-meaning teacher with a few hours a week and no specialist training cannot offer the same depth. This is no reflection on the teachers who have filled the gap, many of whom have done so with great commitment and at the expense of their own time.

The AEU supports the petitioners' request for targeted scholarships for school staff who wish to gain a career development qualification. For scholarships to work, staff need paid study time and backfill so that the qualification is not completed on top of an existing full workload. At present, study time and backfill under the Studies Assistance scheme must be funded by the principal from the school's own budget. Even when a staff member wants to gain a qualification the system clearly needs, there is often no way for the school to make it feasible. An individual school needs to front up the cost of supporting the employee to gain a qualification, and that employee is then expected to move to another school within around five years through our employee mobility scheme, taking their qualification with them.

This is a poorly designed system and again speaks to the operational dysfunction plaguing the Education Directorate. Devolving resourcing to schools and forcing principals to take up responsibility for workforce development means that there is no central oversight or accountability for ensuring there are qualified staff who can undertake essential functions.

Finally, the role needs protecting once it exists. Career practitioners in schools under staffing pressure are at risk of having their time absorbed by relief, classroom teaching or other duties. This already happens to other specialist roles. AEU members report that literacy intervention

[10] Resourcing Review final report, Chapter 7, finding on equity implications of private income sources.

and multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) specialists, English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) teachers and teacher librarians are frequently taken off their programs at short notice to cover for absent teachers. A funded allocation should come with a clear expectation that the time is protected, to be used for career development work with students.

A guaranteed minimum staffing structure

The ACT is one of the few Australian jurisdictions without a transparent, system-wide staffing allocation formula that sets out the roles every school can expect to have. In other jurisdictions, agreed staffing allocations take account of enrolments, school type and student need. Their absence in the ACT creates uncertainty for schools and inequity across the system, and makes it hard to guarantee consistent opportunities for students regardless of which school they attend.

For this reason the AEU has proposed, in current enterprise bargaining negotiations, that the Education Directorate and the AEU develop a staffing agreement setting out the baseline staffing needs of every school, to be included as an annex to the teaching staff enterprise agreement. The claim names career practitioners in secondary and college settings as one of the roles every school should be guaranteed, alongside school leaders, classroom teachers, in-built relief teachers, school psychologists, learning support assistants, teacher librarians, specialist teachers and administrative support. Under this model:

- every school would receive a guaranteed baseline staffing entitlement, so no school falls below a minimum acceptable level,
- the Directorate would be responsible for system-wide workforce planning to ensure every school receives its entitlement,
- schools would keep the flexibility to add staff above the baseline to respond to their local context,
- the AEU and the Directorate would monitor implementation through a joint working party and review the entitlements over time.

This approach would shift responsibility for ensuring career guidance is available from individual principals to the system, which is where the Resourcing Review says it belongs. The Review's terms of reference asked the Expert Panel to develop baseline staffing and costings for core services based on case studies of different school types. The Panel reported that detailed staffing and costings were not feasible in the time available.[11] That work remains to be done, and the Committee has an opportunity to recommend that career practitioners in high schools are included in it.

A guaranteed staffing structure answers the petitioners' first and third requests together. It ensures a qualified career practitioner in every school with Years 7–10, at a ratio set by the

[11] Resourcing Review final report, section 1.4.

system, and it funds the position as part of the school's entitlement rather than leaving principals to find the money within existing budgets.

Recommendations

We call on the Standing Committee to recommend that the ACT Government:

1. Ensure every ACT public school with Years 7–10 has a professionally qualified career practitioner as the petitioners request.
2. Include career practitioners in high schools and colleges in the baseline staffing structure for every school, both through implementation of the ACT Public School System Resourcing Review and through the staffing agreement the AEU has proposed for the teaching staff enterprise agreement.
3. Fund that baseline staffing structure in full.
4. Require the Education Directorate to collect and publish data on career guidance provision in each school with Years 7–12.
5. Fund scholarships for school staff to gain career development qualifications, with paid study time and backfill.
6. Develop a clear role statement for school career practitioners, in consultation with practitioners and the AEU in accordance with the consultation requirements of the enterprise agreement, that protects their time for career development work with students.

Conclusion

Nearly a thousand Canberrans signed this petition because they want every high school student to have access to qualified career guidance. The AEU shares that goal. At present, whether a student gets that guidance depends on which school they attend and whether its principal can find room for a career practitioner in a stretched budget. That is a consequence of system design, and it can be fixed by the system.

The Government has already committed to moving towards one coordinated public education system. Guaranteeing a funded, qualified career practitioner in every school with Years 7–10 is a practical, well-defined step in that direction, and one the Committee is well placed to recommend. AEU members stand ready to work with the Government and the Education Directorate to make it happen.