



16 August 2022

The Hon Tony Burke MP

PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

Re: National Cultural Policy Submission

I write on behalf of the Australian Children's Laureate Foundation [ACLF], an independent, not-for-profit organisation, founded in 2008 to champion and promote the transformational power of reading in the lives of young Australians. The ACLF is a collegial and inclusive organisation with representation from across the field of children's and young adult's literature.

The ACLF's primary activity is to develop and manage the Australian Children's Laureate Program. The Australian Children's Laureate is the national, and international, spokesperson and ambassador for the world of children's literature in Australia. The Laureate and past Laureates are expert, engaging figureheads who help develop an interest in reading and encourage young Australians in practical and inspirational ways to develop, use and increase their literacy skills.

Previous Laureates include Alison Lester and Boori Monty Pryor (2012–13); Jackie French (2014–15); author and artist Leigh Hobbs, (2016–2017); Morris Gleitzman (2018–2019); Ursula Dubosarsky (2020-2021). The March 2022 announcement of Gabrielle Wang as the new Australian Children's Laureate (2022–2023) made a big public impact with blanket coverage across TV, Radio, broadsheets/tabloids, magazines and social media.

The ACLF fully supports the voice for the Arts in Australia involving the National Cultural Policy. Our first Laureate was Boori Monty Pryor, a First Nations author. The ACLF recognises, respects and celebrates the centrality of First Nations cultures in our unique Australian identity. Our current Laureate is Gabrielle Wang, an Australian born of Chinese heritage who strongly reflects the diversity of the Australian community as she travels around Australia as Children's Laureate.

The Arts in Australia would not be as strong without the excellent and outstanding role our Laureates play as artists and creative collaborators. The Australian cultural sector is stronger thanks to the Laureates' contributions to national life, community wellbeing and the economy. The Laureates help Australian creativity to thrive and travel abroad every second year to the Bologna Children's Book Fair to represent the Arts in Australia and meets with Program Managers and other International Children's Laureates at the Biennial International Children's Laureate Summit. The Laureate promotes and enhances Australia's Arts reputation to the world.

The ACLF is a strong institution and has already reached more than half a million young people in person during the past 14 years with our seven Laureates travelling to each state and territory to metropolitan, regional and remote areas.

Proposition

The aim of this submission is to have the Australian Children's Laureate Program formally recognised and financially supported by the Australian Government, with specific support from the Minister for the Arts, to bring a variety of benefits to all members of the community.

By doing so the Australian Government, and the Minister for the Arts, would have an articulate, well-informed, knowledgeable, respected person to consult with, and the Laureate would be able to speak to others about literacy,

writing, reading and spelling on their behalf to a wide range of audiences. The Laureate is highly skilled in writing and illustrating stories that engage and appeal to young people, and adults. The Laureate works on a national program, and every Laureate visits metropolitan, regional and remote areas in each state and territory during their two-year term. The Laureate also engages online through storytelling, workshops, reading and writing presentations and interactive activities.

Traditionally our focus for the Program was on face-to-face events. However, since COVID, we have adapted the Program to include many online talks, workshops and discussions. The response to this has been overwhelmingly positive and we now include this delivery aspect in our planning and programs. The use of quality mentor texts, such as those written by our Laureates, have been evaluated on the Brightpath scale in some WA schools to show an outstanding improvement in students' storytelling ability.

Funding

Currently we only have funding for 14 'Laureate Days' each year, which is why we are seeking support to increase the ability for the Laureate to be much more active in the community. The Laureates have always done many more days than this, they are in high demand, and are booked either through their booking agents or participate through their personal kindness, belief in the joys of reading and generosity of spirit.

The Laureate program has been funded since 2012 through small grants from the Australia Council [currently \$26,000 per year for Laureate Touring] and the Copyright Agency [\$26,400 per year for Laureate stipend and media appearances]. We have had further relatively small amounts donated over the past three years, mainly from private family foundations.

We hold ad hoc fundraising events that have raised about \$10,000 per year. We currently have two part time staff who work for 15 hours each person each week at a cost of approximately \$60,000 per year.

Ongoing, dedicated funding would enable us to increase the Laureate's time and further develop the program. Establishing and running events requires funding for the Laureate and funding for staff to run them, plus travel costs and funding to develop resources – which we currently offer either free or for a small fee. There is also a substantial amount of developmental work undertaken by the board in a voluntary capacity, which is unsustainable in the long term. Our goal is that the Laureate program would be managed by at least one full time staff member and continue to be overseen by the Board.

We hope that the Federal Government, through the Department of the Arts and the National Cultural Policy can commence, and continue, to fund the program as a national initiative and use the Laureate as a figurehead to embed a strong reading culture as well as become an advisor to your Department on future strategy.

The program has no formal support from states/territories however the ACLF works with all Australian, state, territory, and school libraries and with the Commissioners for Children and Young People; and Gabrielle's program includes visiting metropolitan and regional art galleries.

We need Federal funding to continue to grow and expand the reach of our programs. Our recent Biennial Report is available on the ACLF website.

Outcomes and benefits

We receive data from our Laureate publishers that consistently highlight the increase in sales for books during a Laureate's two-year term. There is always an increase in requests for Laureates to visit schools, literature conferences, festivals, and events and when the new Laureate is announced they are always booked out for the first year within weeks.

The Children's Laureate program has grown and developed since its inception ten years ago. The literary community, students, teachers, and parents now look to the Laureate program and our website for inspiration, research and assistance. The Laureate has become the spokesperson for the literary community addressing general concerns and the Foundation has harnessed this interest to develop key, positive messages for the importance, and joy, of reading.

The Foundation works hard to make sure that all children – remote, regional, metro; children using English as a second language from diverse backgrounds; children with disabilities and First Nations children – can find something for themselves on our website and in our Program. With funding and support from the Federal Government we know that we can achieve so much more.

Conclusion

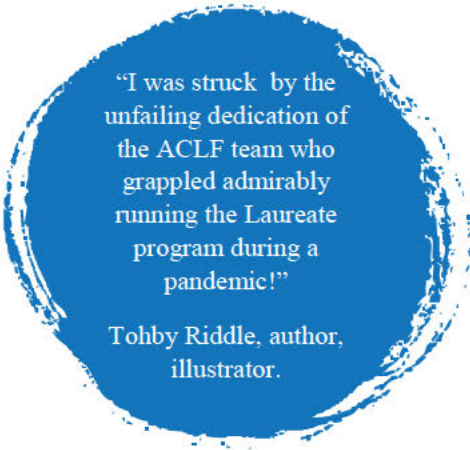
Finally, I mention a comment made by a bookseller at the Australian Booksellers Conference held in Sydney in June 2022. After Gabrielle’s exceptional presentation at the conference an ACLF Board member explained to her that the Australian Children’s Laureate program is run by a small board of volunteers, is not-for-profit, and we depend on small grants, that we have to apply for all too often, she said, “I presumed the Laureate program was funded by the Australian government, just like the Australian of the Year program.” “Oh, how we wish that was true,” our member replied.

I do hope your efforts to support the Arts through the National Cultural Policy will include ongoing funding for the sustainable continuance of the Australian Children’s Laureate program.

Yours sincerely

A solid black rectangular box redacting the signature of Bruce Ellis.

Bruce Ellis
Chairman

A circular graphic with a blue background and a white, hand-drawn border. Inside the circle, white text reads: "I was struck by the unfailing dedication of the ACLF team who grappled admirably running the Laureate program during a pandemic!"

“I was struck by the unfailing dedication of the ACLF team who grappled admirably running the Laureate program during a pandemic!”

Tohby Riddle, author,
illustrator.