



*everyone's family*

# Submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement

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## **Contact**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Smith Family welcomes the Productivity Commission's Review into the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA). The overarching objective of the Agreement – *for Australian schooling to provide a high quality and equitable education* – is clearly critical to the short and longer term life outcomes of young Australians, and in turn Australia's economic and social wellbeing. The review is particularly timely given the initial and ongoing impact of COVID on schools and young people.

### Background on The Smith Family

The Smith Family is Australia's largest national children's education-oriented charity. We work in partnership with children and young people, their families, schools and other educational institutions, community organisations, corporates, philanthropy, Government and the wider community, to provide long-term evidence based educational support to young Australians experiencing disadvantage. In FY21, 180,000 children and young people participated in our programs, as did 35,500 parents/carers and community members.

Our largest program is the long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*. This early intervention program supports financially disadvantaged students by providing:

- A modest biannual payment to families to help them cover core education-related expenses such as books, uniforms and excursions
- Support from a *Learning for Life* Family Partnership Coordinator who works with the family to support their child's long-term participation in education
- Access to a range of programs to help ensure children's engagement in education. These include literacy and numeracy programs, including online tutoring, learning clubs, mentoring and career programs and digital and financial literacy programs for parents.

Students and families are recruited to the program in the primary years of school and can stay on the program through both primary and secondary school and potentially into tertiary education. The program is operating in every state and territory, and currently has over 58,000 participants, with their characteristics including:

- All live in a low income family
- One in five is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background
- One in three students and one in three parents/carers have a health and disability issue
- More than 70% of parent/carers are not in the labour force or are unemployed
- 20% of students have been at 4 or more schools
- 15% do not have a computer or laptop connected to the internet at home.

Each student on *Learning for Life* has a Unique Student Identifier (USI) and a range of demographic, administrative and outcomes data is collected on each student, across their entire participation on the program. Outcomes data includes annual school attendance and achievement, Year 12 completion and post-school engagement in employment, education and training. The USI means that these outcomes can be tracked, regardless of whether or not a student moves school, including to a different jurisdiction. As such, The Smith Family has a unique longitudinal dataset which it is using to both improve its own programs and contribute to the Australian educational evidence base. (See for example The Smith Family, 2018a)

Our programmatic and research experience provides the underpinnings for this submission.

## DRIVERS OF STUDENT OUTCOMES

### Learnings from COVID

A range of research, in particular analysis by Lamb et al, (2020a) of a range of Australian educational data,<sup>1</sup> consistently identifies that, in general, young Australians from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and those living in regional and remote areas are much less likely than their peers to achieve key educational milestones.

Research by Professor John Hattie (2003) identified a range of in-school factors which impact young people's educational outcomes, in particular the quality of teaching that students experience. School culture and environment are also important, particularly the expectations held for all students and providing a safe environment for learning.

Professor Hattie's research and that of others also identify there are a significant number of 'out-of-school' factors which influence student outcomes. Research commissioned by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and undertaken by Lamb et al, (2020b), while examining the potential impact of COVID on Australian students, has broader applicability. This research identified the following challenges for some students:

- **Gaps in basic resources needed to support learning**  
One in six Australian children and young people live in low-income households, where life's basics are harder to come by, including food, secure accommodation and transport. These homes also have fewer books and learning materials in the home, including a desk and quiet place to study, and more limited access to support and resources that help form a foundation for learning.
- **Gaps in technology and ICT resources**  
Access to technology and ICT resources became particularly important for students during remote learning, however regardless of COVID, they are now an essential tool for students' learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While levels of access to ICT and the internet are generally high there is significant variability in the distribution and effective use of technology, based on a range of socioeconomic and demographic factors. This is borne out by data from PISA and The Smith Family's data. Fifteen percent of students we support on the *Learning for Life* program do not have an internet connected to a laptop or tablet at home. For those students who we support who do have an internet connected to a device, many are sharing one device with many family members.
- **Some students are not developing some of the qualities that are key to being a successful learner**  
A range of skills, attitudes and behaviours influence learning outcomes. They include students' belief about their academic abilities, their levels of motivation, ability to set goals and persevere despite challenges, their willingness to seek help when required and ability to be self-directed. These skills, mindsets and behaviours can be taught and developed, however research suggests disadvantaged students generally display lower levels of resilience or perseverance with learning, and may be less likely to ask for help.

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<sup>1</sup> Including NAPLAN, the national 2016 Census, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

- **Not all parents feel able to support or be engaged in their child's learning**  
Parental engagement in children's learning is a bigger predictor of how children do in school than a family's socioeconomic status. Students with engaged parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to do well at school, graduate from school and go on to higher education (Fox & Olsen, 2014).

Despite wanting to be actively engaged in their child's learning, many parents from disadvantaged backgrounds: lack confidence or are uncertain about how to support their child's learning; have a poor educational history or experience with schools; come from a country where the educational system does not encourage parental engagement; have limited English language skills.

The Smith Family's experience working with families experiencing disadvantage suggests that student and family needs are becoming increasingly complex and have been exacerbated by COVID, making it more difficult for schools, despite their best efforts, to meet student needs. This is particularly the case in communities of concentrated disadvantage, where schools have significant proportions of students living in disadvantage. Our research confirms that the young people we support have more limited access to a range of things and opportunities that most young Australians value and have access to. This includes access to: digital technology; school excursions; health assessments and supports; a quiet place to study; regular social outings and family holidays; extra curricular activities, including sport and cultural activities (The Smith Family, 2018a).

In summary, for students living in disadvantage, their families' access to financial resources, services, opportunities and networks of support and advice, in all areas of their lives, is more limited than for students living in more advantaged families. In turn, this impacts on every aspect of their lives, including the educational outcomes they achieve.

### **Foundations laid in the early years**

In addition to the above drivers of educational outcomes, Nobel Economist James Heckman has published extensively on the importance of the early years for laying the foundations of human skills formation and capability. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), which assesses children in the first year of school confirms what happens in the years *prior* to school impacts school outcomes. The AEDC is a good predictor of children's literacy and numeracy outcomes as they move through primary school and into secondary school. A child who is developmentally vulnerable on one domain of the AEDC is more than twice as likely to be in the bottom 20 percent of students for reading skills in Year 7, than a child who was not developmentally vulnerable on any of the AEDC domains (Australian Government, 2015).

The most recent AEDC data, shows that, one in five Australian children are not on track in all five key development areas. For children living in Australia's most disadvantaged communities and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the percentages of children who are not on track are even more significant, at 32.3 and 41.3 percent respectively (Australian Government 2019).

### **Academic achievement through school**

If the National School Reform Agreement was realising its overall objective of a high quality and equitable education, a reasonable expectation would be that educational gaps on school entry between different groups of students (eg low/high socio economic backgrounds, Indigenous/non-Indigenous) would diminish and ideally disappear as young people move through school. As data from NAPLAN and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows, this is unfortunately not the case. There are consistent, and in some instances increases, in the gaps in

academic achievement, as young people move through school when characteristics such as socioeconomic background, Indigeneity and location are taken into account.

Analysis of NAPLAN data by the Grattan Institute (2016) showed for example that the gap between children of parents with low and high education levels grows from 10 months in Year 3 to more than two years by Year 9. Perhaps most tellingly, this analysis also showed that even if students from disadvantaged backgrounds were doing well in Year 3, they made one to two years *less* progress by Year 9, than their similarly gifted but advantaged peers. Achievement in Information Communication Technology Literacy, now identified as a core skill, is also significantly lower for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, relative to their more advantaged peers.

The schools' data reported above pre-dates the COVID pandemic. The move to remote learning which was necessitated for varying periods of time from 2020 and continues for some students in 2022, has further exacerbated pre-existing skills gaps. Analysis by the Grattan Institute of literacy and numeracy data from the 2021 NAPLAN, confirmed an increase in the educational gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in at least two states, Victoria and New South Wales, where there had been significant periods of remote learning (Hunter & Emsile 2021). Year 9 students from a disadvantaged background were more than four years behind their advantaged peers in reading in both NSW and VIC.

### **Supporting stronger educational outcomes for children and young people experiencing disadvantage**

The above data is sobering and clearly identifies that the equity goal of the NSRA is not being achieved. The work of James Heckman and others however, shows that such outcomes are not inevitable for disadvantaged children and young people. Research shows that a child's family circumstances need not determine their destiny. There is clear evidence that it *is* possible to positively influence the educational, employment and life outcomes achieved by disadvantaged children and young people. It requires targeted evidence based support which includes early intervention coupled with balanced long-term support across childhood and across primary and secondary schools.

As the Review's discussion paper notes 'simply providing more funding does not in itself improve student outcomes'. It is essential that investments are informed by the evidence base and The Smith Family welcomes the establishment of the Australian Educational Research Organisation (AERO) and the contribution it is making towards excellent and equitable outcomes for all children and young people.

## **MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK AND PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

### **The current measurement framework**

The Smith Family is very supportive of a national measurement framework that supports:

- The tracking over time of student progress in key outcome areas, including for different sub-cohorts
- The evaluation of policy initiatives which in turn contribute to the Australian educational evidence base
- Effective investment that contributes to the goals of both excellence and equity.

We see the above as a useful criteria for consideration for a new NSRA.

The current 32 key performance measures are grouped into four categories:

- Participation measures such as enrolment, attendance
- Achievement in the National Assessment Program such as literacy and ICT measures
- Attainment such as school completion
- Equity such as Indigeneity, socioeconomic backgrounds

The current framework draws on available evidence showing the relationship between outcomes, such as literacy, numeracy and school completion, and post-school outcomes such as employment and income. These in turn influence outcomes such as health, community connection and life satisfaction. We are therefore supportive of the inclusion of measures such as literacy and numeracy, school completion and post-school learning attainment. These are measures that The Smith Family tracks for students on the *Learning for Life* program.

While understanding the importance of participation measures, particularly from an equity perspective, (for eg high levels of school attendance are particularly important for low SES students to achieve in literacy and numeracy and in turn to complete Year 12), we note that these are closer in nature to *outputs* than *outcomes*.

We also note that ICT literacy has grown in importance for young people over the last five to 10 years, and its importance accelerated due to COVID. However, the current frequency of the National Assessment Program for ICT makes it difficult to track progress, evaluate policy initiatives, contribute to the evidence base or understand the equity dimension of this outcome.

The Smith Family also notes that the current measures do not include a range of important dimensions such as wellbeing (noting that a number of states have developed measures for this but there isn't a universal approach) or creative problem solving skills, self-confidence or entrepreneurial capabilities. These all play a role as young people move through school and impact their post-school opportunities. Evidence from PISA indicates that disadvantaged young people are less likely to have strong levels of these skills and attributes, relative to their more advantaged peers.

While noting these important 'gaps' in the current framework, we are also cognisant of the 'burden' that measurement can put on students, schools and systems and that 32 key performance measures is already a large number. Given that there is still a considerable way to go to achieving equity in most if not all of the current evidence-based measures, such as literacy and numeracy, ICT literacy, and school completion and attainment, we would urge that these outcome areas be maintained in subsequent agreements. Simultaneously, efforts aimed at reducing measurement burden and enhancing the timeliness and value of outcomes measures for teachers and schools should be pursued.

### **Current challenges to data usefulness and availability**

While there is a significant amount of schools and education related data collected in Australia, there are significant challenges to the availability and usefulness of this data for the purposes of assessing the objectives of the NSRA.

These challenges include:

- **Availability and timeliness of data on key equity cohorts**

The most comprehensive analysis of educational data for various equity cohorts has been undertaken by Victoria University's Mitchell Institute (see for example Lamb et al 2020). While highly valuing this work, The Smith Family notes it is not being undertaken by Governments as part of the NSRA and the data it relies on includes the Census, which is undertaken every five years. Further, publicly available data on equity groups only provides student information on one characteristic, for example, Indigeneity or SES. It doesn't for example provide a sense of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls or boys are doing. Small scale research initiatives have identified the value of more

nuanced understandings which take account for example of gender and Indigeneity. Having this data available at the national level would inform policy and programmatic responses, with the likelihood of these responses leading to improved outcomes.

Students with a disability are not currently identified as an equity cohort within the NSRA though a range of research indicates they have poorer educational outcomes than their peers. There is also a lack of consistent educational outcomes data available on this group to ensure there is visibility of how they are progressing, including for example, for low SES students with a disability. For these students there can be a compounding impact of multiple disadvantages.

- **Unique Student Identifier and data integration**

The failure of Australia over decades to implement a Unique Student Identifier (USI) that covers, as a minimum, students' movement through school, VET and university (and ideally through the years prior to school), is significantly impacting Australia's capacity to make improvements on students' educational outcomes. This limitation means it is not possible to undertake quality evaluations of a range of policy initiatives nor contribute as comprehensively as possible to the Australian educational evidence base. While the Education Ministers Council has again agreed to the implementation of a USI and in 2019 the criteria for it, progress in its implementation remains slow, with significant missed opportunities for individual young people and for the system more broadly.

As flagged earlier, The Smith Family has a Unique Student Identifier for students on the *Learning for Life* program. This USI allows the tracking of each individual student's progress over time, on a range of educational outcomes, regardless of whether they move jurisdiction or educational sector. Analysis of the longitudinal LfL data has contributed to the Australian educational evidence base as well as enabling The Smith Family to provide more targeted and timely support to students as they need it.

In addition to the need for a USI, there is now significant capacity to leverage data integration opportunities across jurisdictions and sectors to support improved service delivery and outcomes. This information can critically inform system design.

In noting the benefit such data initiatives can have, The Smith Family notes the considerable data and insights which are collected by non-government organisations, and the potential role this can play in improving student outcomes. For example, The Smith Family has established data sharing arrangements with the South Australian Department for Education. This enables direct real-time access for Smith Family staff to data the Department holds on students The Smith Family is supporting. This is contributing to more timely and targeted support for students, and it is anticipated, improved educational outcomes overtime. This data initiative is the result of a shared commitment to improving the educational outcomes of children experiencing disadvantage. The Smith Family would urge an increased system openness to quality and ethical data exchange initiatives, given the benefit they can bring to student outcomes.

## NATIONAL POLICY INITIATIVES

### **Complexity of Australia's service systems especially for those most in need**

As indicated above, The Smith Family's experience is that student and family needs are becoming increasingly complex, and this complexity impacts students' educational outcomes. There are a significant number of students and families whose experience of disadvantage is multilayered and prolonged, including intergenerational. Many face health and disability challenges, including mental health, alongside of poverty and other issues. As a consequence, they are likely to engage with many Government and non-government agencies, often simultaneously in an effort to access health and disability support, income support, housing support, family violence services and employment services.

Despite the good intentions of those who work in them, and very significant Government and community investment, the systems set up to 'serve' these Australians tend to be complex for them to access. They are often ineffective in supporting positive change. The Smith Family contends that while aspects of Australia's human services system work well, the system needs to be redesigned, so it is better able to address the needs of those young Australians experiencing complex and sustained disadvantage.

Schools are an integral part of the human services system, with barriers to access of these critical services sitting outside the education system itself. These barriers however, directly impact students and in turn schools' ability to support students to achieve educationally. If Australia is to address inequities in educational achievement, attention needs to be paid to how the current service system can better young people to realise their potential.

The current NSRA is an agreement between Ministers with responsibility for schools. This is understandable from one perspective. However, given the intersection of a range of portfolios, including education, community services, health, housing and income support, on the lives of Australian students and their families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and who are currently achieving poorer outcomes than their peers, it is problematic.

While we appreciate the significant challenge, arrangements which put young people at the centre and acknowledge the interconnections between the various dimensions of the service system and more clearly articulate shared accountabilities, we believe would contribute over time to improved student outcomes, in ways which seem unlikely in the current arrangements.

Inherent in this suggestion is significant change to the way human services operate in Australia. We appreciate the challenge, particularly given the different responsibilities of Commonwealth, State/Territory and non-government organisations, but we believe there is some appetite for change across organisations, sectors and jurisdictions. There is also enough evidence and insights from around the world and Australia to inform efforts in this space. We are also cognisant of the individual and collective benefit that would flow from a system which put young people at the centre.

### **Timeframes for agreements**

The Smith Family notes that the Discussion Paper indicates in a few places that "national reform takes time to implement and mature". Whilst not wanting to encourage less of a sense of urgency for action, there *maybe* merit in exploring a 10 year agreement, which has both more significant 'stretch' targets and regular meaningful public reporting on progress.

### CONCLUSION

On a range of educational measures reported under the NSRA young Australians are not achieving their full potential. This is particularly the case for young Australians from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and those living in regional and remote areas. The impact of COVID is exacerbating pre-existing educational gaps between young people experiencing disadvantage and their more advantaged peers, heightening this lost potential.

The Review of the NSRA is therefore particularly timely with significant opportunity to enhance the educational outcomes of all young Australians, particularly those experiencing disadvantage.

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