

MEDIA RELEASE



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Online home tutoring program shows promising results for struggling students

10 August, 2021 – An online tutoring pilot program developed by children’s education charity, The Smith Family, has achieved strong results for school students struggling with literacy and numeracy.

The *Catch-Up Learning* program offered students one-on-one online tutoring with a trained teacher, up to three times a week over six months. The tutoring occurred in the students’ homes.

Concerns that children experiencing disadvantage risked falling even further behind their more advantaged peers because of remote learning, prompted the development of the program.

Anne Hampshire, Head of Research and Advocacy at The Smith Family, said that while COVID-19 and remote learning are challenging for many students and families, there is a risk that the pre-COVID achievement gap between students in need and their more advantaged peers, will worsen.

“For many families experiencing disadvantage, remote schooling exacerbates already challenging situations. A lack of digital technology, adequate space to do schoolwork, or parents lacking the confidence and skills to support home learning, are all likely to contribute to students falling further behind.

“Our aim with the *Catch-Up Learning* program has been to strengthen the skills of students struggling in literacy and numeracy by supporting them to participate in high quality, online tutoring in their own home. The pilot has shown this can make an important contribution to improving their skills in these critical areas.”

Around 100 students on The Smith Family’s *Learning for Life* program participated in *Catch-Up Learning*. Students were from Years 4, 5, 7 and 8 and their 2019 school reports showed they were struggling with literacy and numeracy.

By the end of the program, seven in 10 students had made more progress than would be expected on average, by students over a typical six months of schooling. Impressively, six in 10 attained literacy levels equivalent to, or stronger, than their Year level peers.

Results for numeracy were a little more modest, partly reflecting that at the beginning of the program students were on average three years behind their expected Year level. Despite this, at the end of the program, six in ten students had improved their numeracy to at least the level of progress expected, with 46% making higher than expected progress.

“The *Catch-Up Learning* program was a small pilot, but there is very promising evidence of its capacity to engage students and support greater than expected gains in literacy and numeracy for those who are struggling in these areas.

“The fact that students were attending the program at least twice a week, including over the summer holidays, is phenomenal and testament to their and their families’ commitment to learning.

To see the program contributing to students' increased love of learning and confidence is so significant, given the contributions these make to academic achievement," said Ms Hampshire.

Along with the in-home component, the one-on-one support was a key contributor to these strong results, allowing tutors to tailor lessons to match students' needs and learning styles. The families' long-term, trusting relationships with The Smith Family also enabled the speedy recruitment of students (already supported by its *Learning for Life* education program) who needed support, and the provision of assistance to families to enable their participation.

"Having the tutoring take place in the home meant parents could actively support their child's participation, celebrate the progress they were making, reinforce the value of learning, and better understand their child's learning needs. It also meant parents could pick up tips and strategies from tutors on supporting their child's learning," said Anne Hampshire.

The *Catch-Up Learning* pilot was funded by the Origin Energy Foundation and The Smith Family partnered with ClassCover, who recruited the teachers and provided pedagogical support.

"Even before the pandemic disruptions, there were achievement gaps suffered by disadvantaged students which are unfair, costly, and widening. These results, and adoption of tutoring by Victoria and New South Wales, validates the work of the Grattan Institute which first suggested adoption of tutoring for catch-up learning. Australia should now seize the opportunity to build on this work and help disadvantaged students with tutoring in the longer term," said Sean Barrett, Head of the Origin Energy Foundation.

The Smith Family will use the evaluation findings to refine the *Catch-Up Learning* program and move to a second stage pilot involving more students.

"We are grateful to the students and families who worked so hard through the *Catch-Up Learning* program, and to ClassCover and the Origin Energy Foundation for partnering with us to deliver this crucial pilot for students in need. This program shows that with the right support, students who are struggling can make great progress in their learning," said Ms Hampshire.

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The Smith Family is a children's education charity that helps young Australians in need to succeed at school, so they can create better futures for themselves. Visit thesmithfamily.com.au.

Key statistics from the *Catch-Up Learning* pilot program

- 86% of students who participated made above expected progress in either literacy or numeracy.
- Two in five students made above expected progress in both literacy and numeracy.
- Seven in 10 students made above expected progress in literacy.
- Six in 10 attained literacy levels equivalent to, or stronger, than their Year level peers.
- Six in ten students improved their numeracy to at least the level of progress expected, with 46% making higher than expected progress.

Testimonials

“Liam* expressed how, prior to tutoring, in school he would not pay attention or feel bored. Liam now often comes online and is excited to tell me how well he did in a particular lesson during the day...His attitude towards learning has improved so much as he learnt more during the sessions and became confident in school as a result.”

- Tutor, Year 5 student

“I was astonished at how quickly Madison* made gains in literacy (age 8 to over age 13) – especially in reading and comprehension...with regular shared reading, vocabulary extension, discussion and comprehension strategies, their reading galloped from struggling with basic texts to being able to read nine out of 10 words.”

- Tutor, Year 4 student

“If he does anything fantastic, then he wants [mum] to see, so he calls her and she’s right there...She’s been fabulous...The kind of families that we sometimes [work] with...don’t have those strategies and probably haven’t had great educational experience themselves, so they’re a bit nervous...but I think it was good for her to be there and to see how I managed him and helped him, so hopefully she could get some strategies. [Tutor, Year 5 student with a health and disability issue]...[you] use your own...experience to guide them in the areas that they like and enjoy...So being one-on-one is the number one reason why it was effective for him, but also the type of teaching...only a one-on-one kind of focus can do that. He’d be missed in a class of students.”

- Tutor, Year 5 student

“She did a couple of things to engage him and [she] knows what he likes and dislikes...and has got him doing learning games, getting him learning, [by] playing a game. He’s so eager to win. He’s concentrating more...and she did some learning things...to see what he is better at learning with. She goes ‘Oh, that’s why he acts up. It’s not his learning style’. She’s been changing the way she teaches to his advantage...She’s amazing.”

- Primary carer, Year 5 student

“We had one little boy...who would not turn on his screen. Wouldn’t have the camera on at all...he had his microphone off [too] and they would talk through the chat function. Now it’s all fun. All these weeks later...he’s happily doing that now [using the microphone and camera]. I wondered at the beginning [about the one-on-one], but I think now...that it is a great success...[it] just makes a child feel important. And makes the family feel important as well.”

- Catch-Up Learning Program Coordinator

*Students’ names have been changed to protect privacy