



The Smith  
Family

*everyone's family*

# STRENGTHENING THE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF FINANCIALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS THROUGH RESPECTFUL FAMILY-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

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# The Smith Family



## VISION

A better future for young Australians in need

## MISSION

To create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their **participation in education**

## BELIEF

Every child deserves a chance

## SCALE

125,000 children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals

# Australia's educational challenge: Young people are behind at each stage

## EARLY YEARS



Developmentally  
vulnerable

**One in three** children in the most disadvantaged communities is developmentally vulnerable in one or more key areas when they start school.

## PRIMARY YEARS



Numeracy

**61%** of Year 5 students whose parents have not completed Year 12 or equivalent, achieve above the national minimum standard, compared to 94% of Year 5 students who have parents with a university qualification.

## SECONDARY YEARS



Year 12  
completion

In 2013, **68%** of young people from the most disadvantaged areas completed Year 12, compared with 79% of students from the most advantaged areas.

## POST-SCHOOL YEARS



Post-school  
engagement

**41%** of 24 year olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are not fully engaged in work or study, compared to **17%** among most advantaged.

## *Learning for Life* scholarship



## ***Learning for Life families***

- Over **36,000** children and young people across all states and territories;  
**56,000** by 2020
- **Highly disadvantaged** young people: low income, high rates of health and disability issues, high mobility, high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, majority from single parent families
- **More disadvantaged** than their peers in disadvantaged schools
- **Strong outcomes** – relative to their disadvantaged peers in school attendance, advancement to Year 12, and engagement in education, training or employment post-school.

# LEARNING CATALYSTS



# Learning Catalysts: Improving Educational Outcomes for Disadvantaged Children

- This research was funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council.
- Multidisciplinary research team:
  - Institute of Social Science Research at The University of Queensland
  - Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University
  - The Smith Family

## Aims

1. To examine the circumstances of socioeconomically disadvantaged families and students.
2. To identify what factors contribute to improved educational outcomes for students from disadvantaged families.
3. To build the evidence base to better design and implement programs that are intended to improve educational outcomes of these students.

# Methodology

## Quantitative self-report survey

- 6,000 students and 5,000 parents/carers → 4,000 matched pairs

## Qualitative interviews with 32 families

- Individual interviews with matched pairs provided insight into the **family experience** of education
- Diverse sample:
  - Female and male students aged 11-17
  - Aboriginal background
  - Refugee background
  - LBOTE background
  - Family type (including out-of-home care)
  - Educational attainment
  - Employment status



# WHAT WE LEARNT ABOUT FAMILY-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS



# Parents are aspirational

- Year 12 completion expected; post-school education aspired to

## Education is...

- essential for securing a job, 'being what I want to be'
- contributes to young people 'living a good life'
- broadens understanding of the world
- is an opportunity parents did not have.



*'I only did three days of Grade 8 and then...I had to go to work because my older sister fell pregnant so it was my responsibility to get a job and support them...so I never got to do it and like I said to my kids, I don't care – unless you're having the worst time of your life, I want to see Grade 12 done... Because it's something that I never had the privilege to do. I didn't have a choice to make decisions, you know, where would I like to be in my life...'*

[Linda – Australian schooled]

Aspirations are realistic and shaped by factors such as the health of the child.

# Parents are engaged in their children's education

- Advice and encouragement
- Positive work habits and study skills
- Academic assistance with school work
- Considered decisions on school enrolment
- Involvement at school e.g. volunteering, sport days
- Participation in post-school planning.



*'We talk together. I help [my son] with this thing. I said him, "Don't left everything. If you got exam for two weeks, you plan. Do this week, little bit, and next week, when come, you be ready"...I explain him, if he doesn't like something, "You do that", like PE, "You do that, you attempt, you try your best. You plan everything".'*  
[Josef – refugee background]

# Family factors that *may* be a barrier to positive educational outcomes

- Complex life situations and lack of resources
- Previous (negative) educational experiences can hinder engagement

*'I still feel weird walking into a classroom. It's like, "Not this again"...I think it's going to be even harder next year going to the high school, because it's gonna be like, "Oh"...primary school I was really, really bad at.'*

[Polina – disengaged during high school but regrets not going to university]

- Non-English speaking background

*'Because by myself, I can't do, I can't speak...I can't help my kids so I'm very unhappy... but now I can speak and I don't need an interpreter any more so it's okay.'*

[Lang – refugee background]

- Academic capacity and content knowledge

# Relationships as enablers of positive educational experiences and outcomes (1)

- Schools are a key community institution that can increase access to goods and services, supplementing family resources, networks and knowledge.
- Positive family-school relationships...
  - Support students' relationships with school staff
  - Encourage students' engagement
  - Support students' wellbeing
- Family-school relationship fostered by:
  - Respect, reciprocity and fairness
  - Stability
  - “good” students

# Relationships as enablers of positive educational experiences and outcomes (2)

- Relationships beyond the parent and school are also important

*'I've made sure that she has phone numbers for my brothers and my cousin – people that she loves. My cousin's wife is one of the people who are reasonable people. Like her best friend's mum, I encourage her to chat with her when there's a problem...it's not always me that she turns to but I'd rather it be not the peer group.'*

[Nina – relationship with 17 year old daughter had been strained]



# Strains on the family-school relationship (1)

- Confidence to engage

*'I taught her how to do the k's and then when she went to school they go, "That's not right" ...Well she kept doing the other k and she kept getting told, "No, you don't do it like that" and she said, "My mummy told me". So after that I said I'm not teaching them nothing.'*

[Theresa – self-described as 'illiterate']

- Power imbalance between school staff and families

*'Like I've learned the hard way because I never could get my point across [at the school] and it took a lot of my friends to go "No, Linda, try this, try this". But there's a lot of parents that try their hardest and you can see the teachers or the school's just going "Yeah, yeah, whatever".'*

[Linda – Australian schooled]

- Child's significant behavioural or health issues



# Strains on the family-school relationship (2)

- Misunderstood and misaligned expectations from schools and parents; can be exacerbated in the transition from primary to secondary

*'Once they go to high school...you don't go there. When they're in primary school you go to the primary school all the time but when they go to high school...they just say if I need you I'll ring you.'*

[Theresa – mother of Year 11 student]

- “Invisible” parents may be engaged in ways that schools do not recognise
- Sometimes parents engage in ways that schools may find challenging



# HOW CAN WE USE WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT?



# Ways forward

- Programs to engage parents in learning from the early years
- Access to free or low-cost academic support
- Support for students *and* their families in transitioning to high school
- Support for families to realise education, training and employment aspirations; early-intervention, place-based
- Support families in developing relationships with schools; understanding expectations
- Support schools to reflect on their practices for developing relationships with families



# How The Smith Family is responding

- Ongoing professional development for practitioners working directly with families
- Assist families to address complex life situations through referrals
- Additional short programs

*'Should I say, "Well I don't need this because I should be able to do it myself"? It's sort of embarrassing because you've got to say, "Well, actually, to tell you the truth I can't do it on my own. I need your help"...Without the charity of The Smith Family I wouldn't have been able to do XYZ with the kids...seeing the benefit the kids received, I've been totally amazed'*  
[Edith – single parent]



Further information is available at [www.thesmithfamily.com.au](http://www.thesmithfamily.com.au) including a research report on the *Learning for Life* program

We extend our appreciation to the 32 families who generously shared their time and experience with us. To safeguard their privacy, all names have been changed.

## Research team

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