

A Vision for Quality Schooling in Australia
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everyone's family

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to speak to your conference today. I'll start by telling you about The Smith Family, which provides context for my comments on quality in school education. This is from the perspective of an organisation that works in schools to address the issues *outside* the classroom that make the time *in* the classroom more meaningful.

Many of you *may* know that The Smith Family is a national non-government organisation with the sole focus of supporting disadvantaged children and young people to stay engaged in learning and achieve improved educational outcomes.

We are one of the nation's largest providers of educational programs, working with more than 100,000 children and young people every year. Of these, 34,000 low socio-economic school and tertiary students are in receipt of our Learning for Life sponsorships. About 7,600 of the sponsored students go to Victorian schools, mainly in the government system.

The Smith Family's *vision* is for a better future for young Australians in need, and our *belief* is that every child deserves a chance. Circumstances should never limit the achievement of potential.

Our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need by supporting their long term participation in education.

In 97 communities across Australia, the *Learning for Life* program connects students to private sponsors whose financial support helps families afford the cost of their children's essential school items, such as uniforms, textbooks and school excursions. We also link disadvantaged young people to literacy and numeracy programs, enriching learning opportunities, and role modeling and mentoring programs.

The Smith Family's work is evidence-led and sustained by partnerships with universities, corporates, trusts and foundations. We have strong support from individuals. Sixty-two percent of our income last Financial Year was sourced from fundraising and bequests, and 24.1 per cent from government.

The Smith Family was founded in 1922 by five businessmen who, after donating toys to a local orphanage in Sydney, were asked by the matron how they could be acknowledged. The five men wanted their gift to be made anonymously, so asked the matron to call them 'the Smiths'.

Until 1998 we were a very traditional welfare agency. But we realized we were not addressing the *cause* of the poverty, when we kept seeing the younger generations of the same families coming back to us for help.

Coupled with the evidence of the power of education to break the cycle, and that our families were asking us to help their kids get an education, The Smith Family made the decision to transform itself.

Education is the open door through which potential can be fulfilled. It transforms *lives*, not just minds. For the 14 per cent of Australian children who are living in households earning less than 50 per cent of the median income, we resolved to channel all our resources into reducing intergenerational disadvantage.

Our new five year Strategic Plan has identified the three key high level outcomes:

- that young people are engaged in further study or work
- that young people attain Year 12 or equivalent, and
- that young people stay engaged with learning

These are very much in line with some of the outcomes identified by the Council of Australian Governments, for all young Australians.

In Victoria, we work in inner Melbourne, growth corridor suburbs and rural and regional areas. Students receive a *Learning for Life* sponsorship over multiple years to help them stay at school. Many are recruited in Prep, and a growing number are successfully completing the program at the end of university or TAFE. In return for the funds, the parents sign a Partnership Agreement that commits their children to 90 per cent school attendance, as well as providing receipts to TSF on how their sponsorship was spent, and writing letters to their sponsor.

In the early years of *Learning for Life*, The Smith Family approached schools directly. We built strong relationships from the ground up. These days, our relationship with DEECD is also strategic and high-level given our growing commitment to advocacy and reform. So, with the move to even greater Principal autonomy, TSF is already positioned as a local, place-based non-government organisation with a well-developed capability to broker opportunities on behalf of forward-thinking school leaders.

Of the 12 Victorian locations, The Smith Family is physically located, or soon to be in, six schools. Two *Learning for Life* workers are located in a school or in an adjacent community site. The workers recruit and liaise with families, broker programs into the school and build and sustain the relationships that will keep opportunities flowing for students.

So what is The Smith Family's view on quality in school education? Can we measure quality simply by looking at NAPLAN results? Yes, but it's not the only measure that matters.

The Smith Family takes a broader view. Schools are in the frontline of young people's lives and are often the only universal service available to them. A quality school supports child and youth wellbeing in an integrated and holistic way. Academic achievement is only one part of this approach.

The Smith Family notes that the Melbourne Declaration of the National Goals of Schooling identifies that the role of schools is to ensure that all young Australians become *successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens*.

Through our work on the frontline, we know that there are some schools and communities that face enormous challenges. The lack of resources and services available in the community, and the challenges faced by individuals, families and the community as a whole, place a huge burden on schools. The Smith Family recognises that responsibility for improving educational outcomes *should not* rest solely on the shoulders of teachers, school principals and parents.

In building an argument for a wider interpretation of quality, I refer to John Hattie's research, and a recent report by the *Social Policy Research Centre*, the University of New South Wales, called *Making a Difference*.

As educationalists, many of you will know Hattie's research better than I. It outlines the factors that influence educational achievement and suggests that, to be effective, the role of the school is to be more than a place of formal learning.

The factors that Hattie identifies as influencing educational achievement are: the child; the home; the school; the teacher; the curriculum; and the approaches to teaching. Hattie argues that the student brings to school factors that influence achievement from preschool onwards, including those from home, and their genetics. This accounts for about 50 per cent of the variance in achievement.

As we know, the home can be a place that reinforces achievement of students, or it can bring down aspiration. Positive expectations from the parents can be critical to the success of children. As such, parents need to support their child's learning and create high shared expectations. The home accounts for about five to 10 per cent, considering that the major effects of the home are already accounted for by the attributes of the students.

This suggests that for schools to influence student achievement, they also need to focus on building meaningful relationships with parents to influence the home environment. For real shifts in the NAPLAN results, and not just teaching to the test, schools need to understand the needs of their students in the context of their families and community and develop a way to address those needs.

This may include, for example, aiming to influence the home environment from an early age by linking with early years' groups to support early literacy, or linking with an adult education provider to assist parents with skills development.

Given the powerful effect of the students *themselves* on achievement, schools have a major role in supporting personal development, confidence-building and engagement, and aspiration opportunities. Learning and development happens everywhere. For example, schools can be available as a site for after-hours activities such as sporting or creative development opportunities.

Teachers account for about 30 per cent of the variation in achievement. It is what teachers know, do and care about a student which influences student achievement. The way teachers interact with their students and the genuineness of the relationship they have with them, is an important part of the effect they have. These can be small gestures that make all the difference.

In the words of one young person talking about his school in the recently released *Making a Difference Report*:

I've had generations before me like my dad and all that they used to go there... like they know our family in that way so like from them knowing my family they're all nice. They're 'Oh you're that boy's son', and all that. I like that feeling when they say these things. It feels good when they say that.

For this young person, it was the recognition that made a significant difference to his engagement in learning and school.

The findings in the *Making a Difference Report* reinforce the message that quality schools are *community schools*.

Making a Difference was funded by an ARC linkage program in partnership with The Smith Family, Mission Australia, the Association of Child Welfare Agencies, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Social Inclusion Unit of the Government of SA, the SA Department of Education and Children's Services, DEECD and DEEWR.

It did not set out to determine quality in schooling. It aimed to explore the lived experiences of financially disadvantaged young people. It had a major focus on how they experienced education and school. Some of the young people were attending schools that were working well, while others clearly weren't.

Ninety-six young people from low income families and suburbs were interviewed over an 18 month period. They were asked their perceptions about:

- *school* – the costs, teaching and learning, relationships with teachers, parent relationships with school, relationships with peers
- *neighbourhood* – activities they knew about and those they didn't, costs, peer communities, safety
- *family* – available money, resources, space, and family dynamics
- *aspirations* – immediate, and later for themselves, and for their future children.

Much emerged about how these young people viewed what quality education looked like. The results indicated that for these students to do well at school, they had to *absolutely* believe that education was going to help them reach their potential. Students had to have a personal, *not abstract*, belief that their emotional and intellectual investment in their time at school was going to pay off.

Central to their ability and willingness to engage with education was their need to see that *teachers valued them*. Importantly, there was also a strong message that the school should value what *the family* could bring to the school. If young people could *not* see that they and their family had respect, and that the family circumstances were accepted and *valued*, they very easily disengaged. Like most of us, relationships and recognition were central for these young people. Having faith in them is a key building block for their willingness to invest effort in their own learning.

This finding reinforces the importance of respectful relationships between student and teacher. It reflects how the value system of the school can have a *huge* impact on a young person's interest in learning.

The quality of the school's physical environment also influences a student's attitude to learning. Young people in the *Making a Difference* study were clear that if the toilets don't work, if the sporting facilities aren't good, if the carpets are threadbare and the walls are peeling, kids will think this is a reflection of what the school and the community thinks of them: From one young person:

Another thing, the teachers don't listen to you at all. My mum and sister went up to school – the toilets there are disgusting because everyone smokes there - but no-one listened. Their excuse is 'oh well people tend to destroy the toilets so what is the point in renovating them?'

The report noted the impact that financial circumstances have on secondary school students' decisions. Young people will adapt their preferences if, for example, their favourite subject incurs a cost. They will say they don't want to go on an excursion, for the same reason. They do this to protect themselves, and their parents or carers. It means that they can be doing subjects for which they have no passion, and over time this negatively impacts on engagement.

I think that it's pretty easy [for my family to meet school costs] 'cos I don't pick very expensive subjects, plus I don't go on camps because I don't like them, so that's saved my parents, like, \$1000.

The study showed, and I imagine this will resonate with many of you, that schools with a caring ethic, supportive teachers, a relevant and stimulating curriculum which connected with young people's lives, respectful attitude to families, and the ability to assist with the costs associated with subject choices were best able to support young people.

Probably the most interesting aspect of the study was the importance of location and how this has a *direct* impact on a young person's ability to engage in education. With a scarcity of services and opportunities, such as adequate sport and recreational facilities, public spaces and quality housing, effective family support services, and access to adequate and secure employment, there is an undue burden on schools.

As I said earlier, no-one expects schools to bear the burden and work in isolation. To do so would also be at odds with the well-evidenced ecological model of child development. However, schools can play a *critical leadership role* to reduce the burden on themselves.

Leadership that involves bringing together the groups that have the shared aim of improving young people's educational and wellbeing outcomes. Community organisations, business and the wider community can collaborate to harness the expertise and resources to achieve it.

What might this look like? It's critical to build a strong governance group for the school, representing a broader group than just parents. By formally connecting government representatives, non-government organisations (NGOs), local councils, early years' providers and others through a shared agenda, schools can work more effectively to address the barriers that lead to low student performance.

The recent *Four Corners* program on 24 September, which looked at Claymore in the south-western suburbs of Sydney, portrayed the stark challenges young people, their families, schools and a community face. It is communities like Claymore where strong and different forms of school-community partnerships should be established.

So what does all this mean for The Smith Family's vision for quality schooling in Australia?

The Smith Family's practical experience, and ongoing research, confirms that *strong school-community partnerships* are a central pillar for improving the educational outcomes *and*

achieving a high performing and equitable schooling system. And not-for-profits can play an important facilitating role in maximising the impact of these partnerships.

The Smith Family is playing a lead role in a number of Australian school-Community Hubs pilots - in Werribee and Morwell in Victoria and in the Swan area of Western Australia. Monash University is partnering The Smith Family in the pilot at Kurnai College in Morwell and Churchill.

Now in its second full year of implementation, DEECD commenced a National Partnerships *Extended School Hub* (NPESH) pilot at five sites across Victoria – Geelong North, Sandhurst, Wyndham/Werribee, Frankston North and Hampton East. The Smith Family is the Lead Agency in the Werribee location. Two facilitation staff are employed to work with Galvin Park SC and Wyndham Park PS. Here is a short video about this pilot.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wieXRSzup5U&feature=plcp>

By the end of the pilot in 2013, it is expected that gains for students across the five sites will be evident by:

- changes in intermediary factors that impact on short and long term achievement of improved learning outcomes (for example, attendance, student wellbeing, retention, behaviour), and
- improved literacy and numeracy skills

In Wyndham, the intermediary outcomes are that:

- young people, parents, schools and communities are active and complementary partners in children's learning
- children, young people and families have access to a broad range of learning and development opportunities outside normal school hours
- children are school ready
- student engagement in learning inside and outside the school increases
- schools are viewed as friendly, inclusive and approachable.

At both schools, there are high levels of financial disadvantage and low paid employment of parents. There are many recently arrived refugee families and migrants. There are large numbers of multi-generational disadvantaged families, and children being cared for by guardians and other carers in out of home care. There is low school readiness, and poor social competence. There is a low level of parental engagement with their children's learning. Students have a troubled transition to secondary school and there is a low take-up of work, training and education opportunities. On the positive side, both schools have strong leaders who believe in the work of the NPESH pilot.

Two years into the pilot, much has been achieved, but there much to do. There have been many challenges, as there is with any change-management process. Even though there's strong support for the pilot, there is an ongoing role to inform and elicit the buy-in from staff. As Lead Agency, we can only *influence* the actors, and this requires skill and maturity. It requires, as a core skill, the brokering of sustainable and diverse relationships. This is not a skill that is necessarily located in the education system.

In the first full year, 2011, the pilot concentrated on extended learning opportunities. This included positive experiences for students on which they were missing out. Examples include

Hip Hop classes, Around the Bay cycling, Blueearth physical activity, after-hours sporting activities, and homework clubs. When Glen Orden PS and Glen Devon PS merged to become Wyndham Park PS, the Hub worked with parents to make the merger smooth. Westgate Community Initiatives Group (WCIG) supported Year 6 kids at risk of not transitioning well to secondary school.

Independent evaluation, spanning two terms in 2011, identified the new activities were facilitated through the Hub sites. In Wyndham, there were 21 new activities: 18 enhanced student engagement in learning, and 13 provided increased opportunities that improved health and wellbeing.

Sustainable change is hard and takes a long time. Some of the early successes are indicators of what can be achieved *if* we can sustain the Hub. One case study, Best Start, is outlined in the independent evaluation by I&J Management:

Through the involvement of the Hub, the Wyndham Best Start Project is working with Wyndham Park PS to pilot programs that increase the school readiness of young children and their parents; the readiness of schools and early childhood services to accept young children from diverse and lower socio-economic backgrounds; and the integration of early childhood services with primary schools. This has also had significant benefits for the Wyndham Best Start Project in getting real primary school involvement in the project.

In Year Two we have more closely aligned the Hub's Strategic Plan to the school improvement process. We are beginning to tackle really difficult areas, such as helping to improve VCAL. The core purpose of VCAL, to build experiences and skills for students to make a more seamless transition into work, was not being achieved. Through the Hub, a group of employers were identified and work placements organised. These changes have enabled the school and community to gain more clarity about what the program should be achieving, particularly in identifying the mix of teachers needed to deliver a quality program.

The Partnership Committee, the governance group for the project, comprises 30 representatives from local agencies and business. An Executive, a decision-making sub-group of the Partnership Committee, which includes the two Principals, Local Council, the Regional Network Leader and The Smith Family staff, meets monthly. For the pilot to succeed, the Lead Agency needs to ensure that the Partnership Committee takes ownership and sustains the partnerships. This pilot will continue until June 2014 and, we hope, beyond.

The second project I wish to mention is The Kurnai Education Hub at Kurnai Secondary College in Morwell and Churchill.

The project was initiated by the Gippsland Education Precinct partners which includes key education stakeholders in the Latrobe Valley. Monash University is one of the GEP partners and used HEPPP funding to auspice the project. The University was concerned that the rate of entry to university at Kurnai College in 2011 was 26.7 per cent, compared to 37 per cent in Gippsland overall, and 50 per cent in the whole of Victoria. The University aimed to better support young people to obtain stronger foundation skills, finish school and take up higher education or pursue vocational learning opportunities.

The Smith Family, as Lead Agency, has consulted widely, and developed a strategic plan that identifies and maps priority actions and that efforts are coordinated and focused. The four priority areas are:

1. *Student wellbeing and engagement. Planned activities include:*
 - Using the school as a hub for better coordinated welfare services for students and families to support young people to remain engaged in school (e.g., space for agencies at the school, specialised programs for students at risk)
 - Improved student involvement in school decision-making and opportunities to take leadership roles, to enhance school engagement and participation
 - To foster student engagement through provision of after- school and extra-curricular opportunities to build confidence, self-esteem and self-worth.
2. *Fulfilling potential. Planned activities include:*
 - Supporting foundation skill development through learning clubs, study skills and mentoring and tutoring, including specialised support for Indigenous and non-English speaking background students
 - Learning extension and enrichment opportunities which support student engagement and achievement.
3. *Futures – education, training and careers pathways. Planned activities include:*
 - working with education providers and industry to demystify the tertiary education system and world of work for both students and parents at early secondary level and provide hands on experiences that support this
 - To develop students' understanding of the steps they need to take to get there and provide role models and mentors to encourage them
 - To support Kurnai parents with relevant information about pathways and how they can support their children's aspirations.
4. *Parental engagement. Planned activities include:*
 - Partnerships with adult community education providers to offer adult learning opportunities to parents e.g. ESL classes, financial literacy, and cooking classes.

Monash University has demonstrated great leadership in funding the *process* through which a range of activities are created. The alternative might have been to fund a series of *programs*. One must be honest: Do one-off programs really make a sustainable difference? Or do we have to work differently, and smarter, to achieve the educational outcomes we all desire?

As part of its five year growth strategy, The Smith Family is committed to establishing more community schools, depending on funding. NGOs are well placed to be a facilitator. I suggest that this may be because:

- Creating and maintaining effective cross-sectoral partnerships that help address educational inequity *is not easy*. Building and sustaining the effective partnerships required in disadvantaged communities requires *a complex mix of skills*
- Facilitating deep and long-term relationships is a 'core competency' of many NGOs
- Having NGOs as facilitator reduces the burden of partnership development and management on school staff, and complements school staff's core educational skills
- NGOs networks help bring a range of business, community and council groups to the table

- Credible intermediaries can address school leaders' concerns regarding the match between what a school needs and what potential partners may offer. They can also help mediate the cultural barriers between sectors
- The effectiveness and value of NGOs taking on a key facilitation role has been demonstrated by the evaluation of initiatives such as the Commonwealth Government's *Communities for Children* program

So how will this new vision for schooling be funded?

The size of the educational equity challenge facing Australia, and the increasing complexity faced by schools with high numbers of low socio-economic status students, demands a policy and programmatic environment that facilitates and promotes strong, long-term and genuine school-community partnerships.

This requires funding to support it, and agreement on what, and on whom, the funding should be spent.

The Smith Family, and many other organisations, believe that through the recent Commonwealth *Review of School Funding*, the important first steps in this regard have been taken. The Review, as you would know, recommended a funding model that takes account of both the individual and school level factors known to impact on educational outcomes, such as socio-economic status, indigeneity, remoteness, as well as the concentration of disadvantage. The proposed funding model would channel resources to where they are most needed.

The Smith Family urges the state and federal governments to work together to adopt the recommendations of the Gonski Review and to actively support school-community partnerships to address the long tail of educational disadvantage.

And finally, let's remind ourselves of the statistics with which we are so familiar. In Australia, Year 12 completion rates are significantly lower for students from low socio-economic backgrounds than for students from high socio-economic backgrounds (56% compared to 75%). And we know that students from high socio-economic backgrounds are three times more likely to attend university than students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

We can and must do better than this for the wellbeing of individual children and young people, and for the nation as a whole. How schools seek to take up the challenge to improve the educational outcomes for disadvantaged young people will be critical.

The Smith Family looks forward to working in new and more sophisticated partnerships with universities, schools, business, philanthropy and government so that, collectively, we can enhance the wellbeing of young Australians.

http://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/webdata/resources/files/Making_a_difference_2012.pdf