



everyone's family

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Committee Review of The Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017

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Introduction

A well educated population is the key to Australia's economic and social prosperity, now and into the future. However national and international data confirms there are **major educational challenges** facing Australia. As the recently released report from the Productivity Commission¹ has concluded, "Notwithstanding increases in expenditure on education per student over the past decade, national and international assessments of student achievement in Australia thus far show little improvement and in some areas standards have dropped."

Significant numbers of children and young people are not meeting national and international benchmarks, performance in a number of areas has flat lined or declined, and there are major differences in achievement for different groups of young people. The last is influenced by factors such as socio-economic background, Indigeneity, disability, school location and size, or a combination of these, as highlighted by the data below:

- **NAPLAN**
94% of Year 5 students who have parents with a university qualification achieve above the national minimum standard in numeracy (NAPLAN). The figure is 61% for students whose parents have not completed Year 12 (ACARA 2015).
- **Programme for International Student Assessment**
At age 15, Australian students in the highest socioeconomic quartile are around **three years of schooling ahead** of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile, in reading, mathematical and scientific literacies (ACER, 2017).
- **Year 12 completion**
Around 60% of young people from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds complete Year 12. This compares to around 90% for those from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds (Lamb et al. 2015).

For The Smith Family, this outcomes data remains the **key context** for the *Australian Education Bill* and for educational policy efforts being pursued at **both Commonwealth and State/Territory** levels.

Background on The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity which has provided support to children, young people and families for over 90 years. Our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need, by providing long-term support for their participation in education.

In 2015-16 our programs were delivered in 94 communities across all States and Territories. These programs supported over 127,000 highly disadvantaged children, young people and their families.

¹ *National Education Evidence Base*, Productivity Commission Inquiry Report, 2016

Our approach is early intervention and long-term support for disadvantaged children, young people and their families, in order that these young people achieve educationally. Our programs seek to **complement**, rather than replace, what happens in **schools**. They have a strong focus on parental engagement, and on enhancing the **home-learning environment** as well as strengthening the relationship between **home** and **school**.

The Smith Family has a deep understanding of the causes and impact of educational disadvantage. Our programmatic, research and evaluation work has also generated significant new knowledge on **what works** to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people. This has particularly been gathered from our long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*², which is currently supporting 36,000 children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve educationally.

Current and previous versions of The Australian Education Bill

In recent years The Smith Family has made submissions to a range of Federal Parliamentary Inquiries into the *Australian Education Bill*³. Our focus in those submissions has been on the underlying **principles**, **Preamble** and **Objectives** of the Bill, as this is where our expertise and broader **beyond-school** focus is most relevant. As we are not a school or part of a school sector or educational jurisdiction, we are not in a position to comment on the **complex funding arrangements** which apply to schools in Australia, including the particular **weightings** or **per student costings** that may apply.

We have however been cognisant that current arrangements are **complex, inconsistent**, and **difficult to understand**. This also applies to the transition arrangements set out in the range of bilateral agreements.

More particularly, we remain significantly concerned about the **clear gap** in educational achievement experienced at the aggregate level by different groups of Australian students, as noted earlier. This gap highlights for The Smith Family, the need for appropriate **levels** and **distribution** of available funding, based on student need, and the use of funding in ways that are informed by **evidence**.

The Smith Family is mindful that any arrangements at the Commonwealth level, while very important, will form only a part of the **overall arrangements**, including funding, that apply to education in Australia. This is a consequence of history and Australia's constitutional arrangements regarding education. While beyond the responsibility of the Federal Parliament alone, efforts aimed at improving Australia's educational performance will require strong collaboration and complementary effort and investment from the States and Territories, if progress is to occur, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

² Further information on the *Learning for Life* is available from www.thesmithfamily.com.au/research/reports

³ This includes Senate and House of Representatives' Inquiries in 2013 and 2014.

The Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017

This submission draws on our previous submissions made on the *Australian Education Bill* and again focuses on the principles, Preamble and Objectives of the Bill.

Needs based sector blind school funding

Given the continuing evidence of educational disadvantage experienced at the aggregate level by some groups of students, The Smith Family continues to strongly endorse **sector-blind needs based** school funding. We support **additional funding** being allocated to schools on the basis of the **characteristics** of their **student cohort** and on relevant **school factors** such as location and size. Given the clear evidence both from Australian data (such as NAPLAN) and international data (such as PISA), of the impact of a range of student and school-related factors on educational achievement, it is critical that school funding, both from the Commonwealth and State/Territory governments reflects this. The Smith Family therefore welcomes the continued inclusion of the principle of needs based school funding in the *Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017*.

Complementing the principle of how funding is allocated must be the principles of **public accountability** and **transparency**. The existing multiple funding arrangements are not merely a reflection of Australia's complex Federal-State/Territory relationships and they serve to undermine consistency, transparency and in turn public confidence in this nationally important area. Consistency and transparency must be underlying principles for school funding, both from the Commonwealth and the States/Territories, and The Smith Family welcomes efforts which aim to enhance these principles.

The role of school education

School education has a crucial role to play not only in the economic wellbeing of individuals and Australia as a whole, but in the social, civic and cultural wellbeing of both individuals and the nation. The Smith Family therefore takes a comprehensive view of the purpose of school education, in line with documents such as the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* and the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. We therefore support the inclusion in the Preamble of the role education plays in preparing students for "full participation in society". In line with the Melbourne Declaration, we see this as including the goal that "all young Australians be successful learners; confident and creative individuals; and active and informed citizens ...(able) to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives".

Shared responsibility and national leadership

The Smith Family has previously argued⁴ that the Commonwealth has a key role to play, in conjunction with the States and Territories, in both improving educational outcomes for all young people and providing **leadership** to ensure disadvantaged children and young people are able to realise their full potential.

⁴ See for example The Smith Family's submission to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding, March 2014.

We have previously urged the Commonwealth to take a leadership role in **monitoring** and **publicly reporting** on educational outcomes across the nation, including for different groups of students such as those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds or those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The Smith Family therefore welcomes the acknowledgement in the Preamble in the *Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017*, of the essential role of the Commonwealth in school education. More particularly we welcome the Preamble's explicit reference to the Commonwealth's **national policy leadership** role and to facilitating **national performance assessment** and **reporting**.

We would urge that as part of this leadership function, the Commonwealth consider how it can contribute to identifying **successful initiatives** and approaches that improve educational outcomes, and in turn for **sharing** that knowledge widely.

There is currently no **systematic** way in Australia for sharing evaluation and research efforts in education. The recent Productivity Commission report has noted that the two **largest gaps** in the national education evidence base are evidence about:

- The impact of policies, programs and education practices in Australian schools and early childhood education and care services.
- The most effective implementation strategies for turning best practice into common practice.⁵

This is a fundamental gap and results in significant inefficiencies and a reduced likelihood of effective and scalable initiatives being developed and implemented across Australia. The end result is not only wasted resources, but even more critically, the failure to implement initiatives that positively impact on young people's educational outcomes.

In contrast to education, other areas of public policy have developed Clearinghouses for sharing knowledge and good practice in 'what works' and ideally what 'doesn't work', as well as processes for accrediting evidence based programs.

The Smith Family would therefore strongly urge the Commonwealth, as part of its national policy leadership role, to take the lead in identifying and sharing **successful initiatives** that improve educational outcomes. This would be a critical contributor to more effective educational program delivery and better use of limited resources.

⁵ *National Education Evidence Base*, Productivity Commission Inquiry Report, 2016

Monitoring arrangements

Related to the use of evidence is the use of monitoring arrangements to drive improved performance. The Smith Family has long argued that monitoring arrangements and the use of research and evaluation to support improved student outcomes are not as strong as they need to be⁶. The 2011 Federal Review of Funding for Schooling identified for example that more than 40 percent of the 143 educational programs funded to support disadvantaged students did not report any evaluation being undertaken. Of those that did, only a small number examined the program's impact on learning.

The Smith Family therefore welcomes indications from the *Australian Education Amendment Bill* that there will be a greater focus on **evidence-based reforms in schools**. We would argue that such reforms should be developed and implemented in partnership by the Commonwealth and States/Territories, as well as drawing on the significant expertise and experience of schools, educational systems, researchers and non-government organisations, who work with students.

National data including for particular groups of students

As part of strengthening monitoring arrangements, The Smith Family would urge that attention be given to developing more robust **nationally comparable** and **publicly available data** on outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students. Data on particular groups of students, such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and those living in non-metropolitan areas, is important, given that at an aggregate level these students tend to have poorer outcomes than their peers. Outcomes data is often currently not available for these key groups, or not available on a consistent and national basis. Aggregate data can 'hide' important differences in the outcomes being achieved by different groups of young Australians. This is problematic for good public policy.

In implementing new arrangements, the **timeframes** for monitoring improvements in student outcomes should be realistic and reflect the time that may be required to support the improved performance of highly disadvantaged students. Intergovernmental agreements which identify these monitoring arrangements should be **publicly available** as should the subsequent reporting of progress under these arrangements. The former COAG Reform Council previously published an annual report on national educational outcomes which reported progress on the National Education Agreement. Data was broken down by a range of factors such as Indigeneity, location, gender and SES. The consistent format and high readability of these documents meant they made a useful contribution to public policy.

National unique student identifier

Complementing the above proposals regarding monitoring and data is The Smith Family's strong recommendation that work on a unique student identifier be prioritised. This is a recommendation of the recent Productivity Commission. All 36,000 students on The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program have a unique student identifier, and this is a key component of us being able to track the **individual progress** of students, regardless of the school they are attending or the state in which they are residing. In turn, this allows us

⁶ See for example The Smith Family's submission to the House Standing Committee Inquiry into the *Australian Education Bill 2012*, February 2013.

to provide **targeted** and **timely** support and assess the individual and aggregate impact of the support we are providing. The current lack of a **national unique student identifier** seriously impacts on Australia's capacity to assess educational progress, including for disadvantaged students, and to more accurately evaluate the effectiveness of educational spending.

Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools is not a specific component of the Australian Education Amendment Bill, however it has significant potential to contribute to the overall aims of the Bill. In light of our above comments on the importance of evidence in informing efforts aimed at improving educational outcomes, The Smith Family welcomes the focus of the Review. We are hopeful that the Review's examination of the most effective strategies to raise the performance of students and schools, and on accountability and reporting, will make a significant longer-term impact on improving the outcomes of Australian students. The Smith Family looks forward to contributing to the Review.

Partnerships including the role of not-for-profits

The current Preamble of the *Australian Education Bill* acknowledges the importance of **strong partnerships** to school education, including across jurisdictions, and with non-government education authorities, parents, carers, teachers, families, employers, not-for-profit and community organisations. The Smith Family has previously welcomed this acknowledgement as it is only through **strong cross-sectoral** and **cross-jurisdictional partnerships** that the performance of schools and students will be improved. The Smith Family regrets that this focus has been dropped from the proposed new Preamble.

Financial Impact of the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017

The Smith Family welcomes the additional and recurrent school funding from 2017-18 to 2026-27 that the Australian Education Amendment Bill will result in. We understand from the Explanatory Memorandum to the Bill, that this additional funding will be of the order of \$1.5 billion between 2017-18 and 2020-21 and \$16.4 billion between 2017-18 and 2026-27. As noted earlier, the overall impact of this funding will be influenced both by how these funds are spent, but also in how it **complements funds** provided by the States/Territories and other stakeholders who contribute directly or indirectly to the resources available to students and schools.

Conclusion

The Smith Family continues to support sector blind needs based school funding and allocation by both Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments of resources in-line with this principle. We welcome the Commonwealth taking a national policy leadership role, including in monitoring and publicly reporting on educational outcomes, including for different groups of students.

We urge the Commonwealth to take a leadership role in identifying and sharing effective strategies that improve educational outcomes. We also urge the Commonwealth and State/Territory governments to prioritise a national unique student identifier.