



everyone's family

How do we achieve a high-performing, high-equity schooling system?

**CEDA Victoria Lunch
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Address by Dr Lisa O'Brien, CEO, The Smith Family

It's a great pleasure to be here and to speak with you about a topic that we at The Smith Family see as crucial to Australia's economic and social wellbeing now and into the future, and one which resonates with CEDA, namely *how do we achieve a high performing and high equity schooling system?*

I particularly welcome the fact that we have a diversity of businesses and industries represented here, as well as strong representation from the higher education sector. We all have a shared interest in this question and our collective efforts will undoubtedly be required as part of the solution.

I'd also like to thank our hosts, the Nous Group, and given their important role in the Commonwealth Review of School Funding, it's particularly appropriate that they are hosting this lunch. The Review of Funding has shone the national spotlight on our schooling system, not only from a public policy context but also importantly within the wider community. The Smith Family believes that the general direction proposed by the Review is a key part of the solution for how we might achieve a high performing and high equity schooling system and I'll return to the Review later.

I'd like to do three things in my discussion with you today. Firstly, I'd like to give you a bit of background on The Smith Family. Secondly, remind us all of some of the data which highlights the need for urgent action on our schooling system. And finally share some thoughts on how we might achieve better educational outcomes for children and young people and the role that the various sectors might play in this. I'm also very much looking forward to getting your thoughts on how we might work together in this area.

The Smith Family

So beginning with The Smith Family. The Smith Family, as you may know, is a national charity which this year celebrates its 90th birthday. Across our long history, we have always focused on supporting Australians in need. This year, following a strategic review, we have refined our vision and mission in order to maximise the impact of our work. Our new vision is *a better future for young Australians in need* and our mission is *to create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education*. Fundamental to our work is the belief that *every child deserves a chance* to realise their potential, no matter what their financial or socio-economic circumstances or background.

To help us fulfil our mission, our *Learning for Life* program provides financial support for young people's educational essentials, supportive relationships with a *Learning for Life Worker* and sponsor, as well as access to a range of learning support and mentoring opportunities. This support begins with early-learning programs in the pre-school years to help children make a smooth transition to school. It continues right through the primary and high school years in order to keep young people engaged and achieving at school, and then helps them make successful transitions to further education, training or employment, including tertiary study.

Our approach recognises that parents are critical in helping young people to participate in education and that some parents may need support to build their own skills. We offer parents tools to support the development of their children's early numeracy and literacy, as well programs to support their own digital and financial literacy skills. Central to how we work are extensive partnerships with government, corporates, educational and other community organisations.

The Smith Family works in 97 communities across Australia and in the 2011-12 financial year we supported over 106,000 children, young people and their parents/carers. This included supporting 34,000 on a long-term *Learning for Life* educational scholarship. The three high level long-term outcomes that we are working to achieve are that:

- Young people stay engaged in learning as evidenced by their school attendance rates.
- Young people complete Year 12 or equivalent.
- Young people are in education, training or employment after they leave our program.

So hopefully from this description you can see how important a high performing and equitable schooling system is to the work of The Smith Family. That is to say nothing of its national importance to Australia's social and economic wellbeing now and into the future.

Australia's educational challenge

I'd now like to remind us all of some of the data which highlights the need for urgent action on our schooling system. Having a collective understanding of the nature and extent of the problem facing Australia is an important step in being able to address it.

Let me begin by quoting the executive summary of the *Schooling challenges and opportunities* report written last year for the Federal Review of School Funding by the Nous Group, the Melbourne Graduate School of Education and the National Institute of Labour Studies. It provides an excellent high level overview and begins by noting that:

Australia's school system is among the better performing systems in the world. Taken as a national average, our children at age 15 are scoring relatively well on mathematics, literacy and science tests compared to their counterparts around the world.

It goes on to note that:

This overall result however is not as strong as it has been in the past and masks a wide degree of variability within our education system. That variability relates to educational outcomes, and to equity – that is, the degree to which people from all backgrounds are able to realise their potential in school.

The report identifies the reason why Australia is doing well 'on average': *there is a sizeable proportion of schools that are producing very good results, a large number of schools that are not and a group in the middle that helps balance this out.*

What the report particularly notes is [that] *what is striking (in Australia) is the strong correlation between the performance of a child and the average SES of all students that attend their school. In other countries, including 'high equity' countries like Finland and Canada, such an effect would not be evident.* This goes to the heart of whether young people in Australia – regardless of their backgrounds – are able to realise their educational potential.

So let's dig a little deeper and remind ourselves of some of the differences in educational outcomes being achieved by different groups of young Australians. We know these differences start early with a third of children living in the most disadvantaged communities starting school developmentally vulnerable. If we look at the primary years and the 2011 Year 5 NAPLAN results, we see that while there have been some important improvements for Indigenous students, a quarter of this group is still not meeting the minimum national numeracy standard. This compares to around 5% or 1 in 20 of non-Indigenous students.

If we look at Year 12 completion rates, these are significantly lower for students from low SES than for students from high SES – 56% compared to 75%. Importantly, data released this month by the COAG Reform Council, shows that only 72.5% of 18 to 24 year olds are engaged in post school education, training or work.

These statistics give life to the important conclusions that the Nous Group report made regarding the educational outcomes being achieved by young Australians. And they are also some of the statistics that we at The Smith Family are aiming to contribute to improving. These statistics, amongst a range of others, identify a major problem confronting Australia.

In summary:

1. Our educational performance has declined since 2000, while over the same period, the performance of a number of our neighbours has improved.
2. There are significant numbers of young Australians not achieving key educational outcomes.

3. The link between student background and educational outcomes is more pronounced in Australia than in other comparable high performing countries.

As leaders of a diverse range of businesses and organisations, I'm sure you are very aware that the key to Australia's economic and social wellbeing, now and into the future, is a highly educated population. This is the foundation for ensuring Australia is able to meet the challenges and opportunities of a highly volatile global economy. It's also the key to the ongoing social cohesion that has been so central to our nation. As Australia's population ages and some of our international competitors improve their educational performance, harnessing the potential of all young people will be essential if the economic prosperity we have long enjoyed is to continue. Yet as the above data highlights, Australia's future prosperity is not guaranteed.

So having identified the urgent need to improve the educational outcomes being achieved by young Australians, let me turn to three of the key components that The Smith Family sees as part of the solution to addressing the problem before us.

Firstly, it is fundamental that we as a nation set ourselves the collective goal of an educational system which is both high performing by international standards and characterised by high equity. We need to care about this goal both as individual citizens and from our respective sectoral perspectives. It is in our overall best interests that all young people are able to maximise the contribution they make to the community. There is ample evidence that young people who have poor educational outcomes are more likely to experience unemployment and poorer health outcomes and rely more heavily on income support payments. I believe there is a growing understanding and consensus across the community, stimulated in part by the Review of School Funding, that more needs to be done in this area. As leaders within the community, we all have a role to play in both building that consensus and in moving the policy response forward.

Secondly, as part of achieving this goal we must both reform the way our schools are funded and how those funds are spent. Doing one without the other will not realise the goals of high performance and high equity. 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 recommended, as you may know, a funding model that takes account of both the individual and school level factors known to impact on educational outcomes, such as SES, Indigeneity, remoteness, as well as the concentration of disadvantage – the last being highlighted in particular in the Nour report to the Review. For those young people who are in schools in highly disadvantaged communities, there are fewer bridges to the wider networks and resources that are important in supporting educational and employment pathways. The proposed funding model would channel resources to where they are most needed, and The Smith Family believes that is a critical part of achieving the goal of lifting Australia's educational performance.

Thirdly, of equal importance to the quantum of resources available to individual schools, is how these resources are spent. More recent policy discussions regarding a National School Improvement Plan reflect this. This Plan and complementary initiatives being implemented across a range of jurisdictions, highlight the importance of enhancing the quality of teaching in schools. This is an important part of achieving a high performing and high equity schooling system. As a community we should want some of our best graduates being attracted to working to improve the educational outcomes of all young Australians. But in The Smith Family's view, we need to place an appropriate and realistic emphasis on the contributions teachers can make to improving educational outcomes. We cannot expect – however appealing such a policy response might be – that simply working in this area will enable Australia to address the educational challenges it faces.

As the oft cited work of Professor John Hattie notes, and I suspect our individual experience and common sense would affirm, a student brings to school a range of factors that influence achievement. They also bring a set of personal dispositions that can have a marked effect on the outcomes of schooling. The home can either nurture and support achievement of students, or it can be harmful and destructive. Positive expectations from parents can be critical to the success of children. The community in which a young person lives also has a deep impact on their educational outcomes. As the Productivity Commission has recently noted 'given the varied and complex ways in which these factors can influence students' educational experiences, a schools workforce policy is just one part of a wider suite of responses needed to address educational disadvantage'.

Education is a whole of community responsibility

So while acknowledging the key role teachers have in contributing to the educational outcomes of young people, The Smith Family would strongly argue that education is the responsibility of the community as a whole and not schools alone. Schools in disadvantaged communities in particular, cannot be expected to bear the sole responsibility for the educational outcomes of the children and young people in their care, given the resources available to them and the general shortfall in services and infrastructure provision that their communities often experience. Many disadvantaged communities do not have well maintained and resourced local environments, secure affordable housing and the infrastructure that connects people to strong labour markets and further educational opportunities. From a young person's perspective this often means they have limited access to quality sports clubs and facilities, access to arts based and cultural programs, work opportunities, and the diversity of networks that are needed to get ahead. Without an adequate base of broad resources and supports within a community, there can be an undue burden placed on schools which are the main and sometimes only site where social policy interacts directly and universally with the lives of children and young people.

Strong school-community partnerships

In order to address this, The Smith Family would argue that strong school-community partnerships, in which schools, families, governments, business and community organisations work together, are a central pillar for improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people. These partnerships have the capacity to contribute both to a high performing and high equity schooling system. But these partnerships can't be the light touch, short-term, well-intentioned initiatives that we have seen in communities across Australia over many years. To be effective, these partnerships need to be deep, strategic and long-term. They need to enable new ways of working across sectors, institutions and portfolios. They need to enable new and different resources, skills and expertise to be brought to a school community and in a way which doesn't distract principals and teaching staff from their core role and expertise of educational leadership.

The Smith Family believes that the size of the equity challenge facing Australia demands new or more nuanced school-community partnerships. A number of such approaches are currently being implemented around Australia, and The Smith Family is playing a lead role in a number of them, including in Wyndham and Gippsland here in Victoria and in the Swan area of Western Australia. The hallmark of these initiatives includes:

- Acknowledging the multiple factors that influence educational outcomes for children and young people.
- Emphasising the role of schools is to prepare young people for life and create a foundation of learning to learn.
- Having a strong focus on relationships, at the individual level and also between agencies and institutions.
- Having a strong focus on the voice of young people themselves within the planning, design and implementation stages.
- Having clearly defined outcomes which are seen as the collective responsibility of a range of parties and accountability processes which allow for ongoing improvement.
- Moving well beyond 'joined up' service delivery to fundamental paradigm shifts which centre on the young-person and take account of the multiple life contexts and identities of students in the 21st century.

A role for non-government organisations

It is these types of multi-layered and comprehensive partnerships which we see as a key platform for achieving a high performing and more equitable schooling system. We would also argue that Non-government organisations can and should play a key role in facilitating these deep and long-term school-community relationships which ultimately contribute to improving the wellbeing of children and young people. Such a facilitation role is the core expertise of many NGOs. Such a role is often necessary because these kinds of collaborations are not easy to build or sustain. Finding potential partners and resources, knowing who might have the expertise to advise and guide program development, gathering information about needs, knowing how to and evaluate the impact of a collaboration all take time and require different kinds of knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

So in conclusion, The Smith Family would argue that to address the national educational challenge facing Australia we need:

- Firstly, a national commitment to a high performing schooling system that is characterised by high equity. This commitment needs to be shared across sectors and across the community.
- Secondly, a school funding system which directs resources to where they are most needed and takes into account the individual and school level factors known to impact on educational outcomes.
and
- Finally, comprehensive school community partnerships which involve government, business, educational and not-for-profit organisations.

The Smith Family believes that now is the right time for governments, business, and the community and educational sectors to work together in new ways to improve Australia's educational performance. We look forward to working with other sectors to improve the educational outcomes of young Australians. It is not only in the best interests of young people themselves, but it's undoubtedly in our collective best interests.