



everyone's family

Progress on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission

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Overview of The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity founded in 1922 to improve the lives of disadvantaged children in Australia. Almost a century on from its founding, it is now the nation's largest children's education charity.

Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education. This mission is founded on the belief that every child deserves a chance.

Our mission guides every element of our work, including program development and delivery, research, advocacy and fundraising. The Smith Family delivers programs in each state and territory in Australia, in over 90 communities, including many regional and rural communities.

In 2016-17, The Smith Family supported more than 150,000 children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals through its programs. Over 120,000 children and young people participated in programs run by The Smith Family. This includes around 40,000 children and young people participating in our largest program, *Learning for Life*, a long-term education scholarship.

Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to make a brief submission on Australia's progress in fulfilling its obligations under the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This submission focusses on **Cluster 8: Education, leisure and cultural activities**, and in particular on Article 28 of the CRC which sets out the rights of all children to education. The Smith Family works with children from disadvantaged backgrounds across Australia and is concerned that inequalities in educational outcomes are impeding Australia's ability to fulfil its obligations under the CRC.

Children and young people living in poverty

Around 1.1 million children and young people in Australia are living in poverty. This is just over 15 per cent of all young Australians. There has been little recent progress in lowering these figures, with child poverty (0-15 years) rising 2 per cent between 2004 and 2014.¹

Children and young people who live in conditions of poverty have lower levels of wellbeing than their peers, including worse health, lower levels of engagement with school and greater experiences of marginalisation and exclusion. This can have long-term consequences for health and human capital development, with potential impacts on children's developmental, educational, employment and other life opportunities.²

Living in these circumstances impacts on the ability of children to fully enjoy their rights as set out in the CRC, including their rights to education, to the highest attainable standard of health, and to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

¹ Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) (2016). *Poverty in Australia 2016*, ACOSS: Strawberry Hills.

² Redmond G, Skattebol J, Saunders P, Lietz P, Zizzo G, O'Grady E, Tobin M, Thomson S, Maurici V, Huynh J, Moffat A, Wong M, Bradbury B & Roberts K (2016). *Are the kids alright? Young Australians in their middle years*, Final report of the Australian Child Wellbeing Project, accessed May 2018 at http://australianchildwellbeing.com.au/sites/default/files/uploads/ACWP_Final_Report_2016_Full.pdf

Children, young people and education

Poverty is a major influence on the educational outcomes achieved by children and young people in Australia. About a quarter of all young Australians are not meeting key educational milestones, including in the early years, school and post-school transitions.³ The situation is particularly acute for certain groups, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, those living in non-metropolitan areas and those attending schools with a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children from these backgrounds are at risk of poor educational outcomes throughout their school career.

The backgrounds and circumstances of these children are impacting on their capacity to fully participate in education and realise their potential.

The following statistics demonstrate the scale of the challenge:

Early years

- 32.6 per cent of children from Australia's most disadvantaged areas are developmentally vulnerable in one or more key areas in their first year of school, compared to 15.5 per cent of children from the least disadvantaged areas.⁴

Primary school

- 59.6 per cent of Year 5 students whose parents did not complete Year 12 achieve above national minimum reading standards, compared to 94.0 per cent of students who have a parent with a university degree.⁵
- 63.4 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Year 3 achieve above the national minimum standard in reading, compared to 89.6 per cent of non-Indigenous students in Year 3. For Year 9 students the gap is wider, with 42.5 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieving above the national minimum standard compared to 78.8 per cent of non-Indigenous students.⁶

Secondary school

- 60.6 per cent of students from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds complete Year 12 or equivalent, compared to around 89.1 per cent of those from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds. Only 43.4 per cent of students from very remote areas complete Year 12, compared to 78.2 per cent of those in major cities.⁷

³ Lamb S, Jackson J, Walstab A & Huo S (2015). *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out. No. 02/2017*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute: Melbourne.

⁴ Australian Government (2016). *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2015: A snapshot of early childhood development in Australia*, Department of Education and Training: Canberra.

⁵ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) (2017). *NAPLAN Achievement in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy: National Report for 2017*, ACARA: Sydney.

⁶ ACARA *ibid.*

⁷ Lamb et al. *op cit.*

Post-school engagement in work or study

- Only 58.9 per cent of 24 year olds from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds are fully engaged in education, training or work, compared to 83.1 per cent of those from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds.⁸

Widening gaps

Of particular concern to The Smith Family is the fact that the gap in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students increases as they move through school, including for bright students, as highlighted by the data below.

- Students whose parents have low levels of education are 10 months behind students whose parents have a degree in Year 3, but this gap widens to two-and-a-half years by Year 9.⁹
- Bright students in disadvantaged schools experience huge learning gaps between Years 3 and 9. Children who are high achievers in Year 3 make two-and-a-half years less progress by Year 9 if they attend a disadvantaged school rather than a high advantage school. High achievers in disadvantaged schools actually make less progress than low achievers in advantaged schools between Years 3 and 9.¹⁰
- By the age of 15, students from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds are about three years ahead of students from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds in maths, science and reading. The gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students is about two and a half years, while the gap between metropolitan and remote students is about one and a half years.¹¹

For many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the school system is not contributing to the narrowing of the educational gap.

Consequences of poor educational outcomes

Poor educational outcomes affect young people's opportunities and life outcomes, including their employment prospects, health and social connectedness. This results in significant costs to young people themselves and to the wider Australian community. For example, it has been conservatively estimated that the lifetime costs to governments and the community for each young person who does not complete Year 12 or equivalent by age 19 is close to \$1 million.¹²

Early intervention and balanced long-term support

Two important principles for positively influencing the outcomes achieved by disadvantaged children and young people are early intervention and long-term support. The early years of life

⁸ Lamb et al. op cit.

⁹ Goss P, Sonneman J, Chisholm C & Nelson L (2016). *Widening gaps: What the NAPLAN tells us about student progress*, Grattan Institute, accessed May 2018 at <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/937-Widening-gaps.pdf>

¹⁰ Goss et al. op cit.

¹¹ Thomson S, De Bortoli L & Underwood C (2017). *PISA 2015: Reporting Australia's results*, Australian Council for Educational Research: Camberwell.

¹² Lamb S & Huo S (2017). *Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education*, Mitchell Institute: Melbourne.

play a key role in laying the foundations for children's future learning and lifetime outcomes,¹³ and intervening early before a problem becomes entrenched is more effective and less costly.¹⁴ However, if early support is not followed up by later investment its effect is diminished as children grow. Investment distributed over the first two decades of a child's life produces more adult skills than the same level of investment focused on one part of a young person's life - for example, on either the early years or adolescence.¹⁵

The Smith Family's programs apply these principles in practice. For example, students on our *Learning for Life* program can begin in the first year of school and continue through to the completion of tertiary education. *Learning for Life* has positive impacts on students' school attendance, Year 12 completion, and post-school engagement in employment, education and training.¹⁶

Conclusion

Ensuring access to education and enhancing the capacity of every child for success in education has benefits for individual children and for the entire Australian community. At present, there are significant inequalities in educational outcomes for young Australians depending on their socioeconomic, cultural and geographical circumstances. Early intervention and balanced long-term support can help to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged children, assisting Australia to more fully meet its obligations under the CRC.

¹³ McLachlan R, Gilfillan G & Gordon J (2013). *Deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia*, rev., Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper: Canberra.

¹⁴ Homel R, Lamb C & Freiberg K (2006). 'Working with the Indigenous community in the Pathways to Prevention Project', *Family Matters*, 75, 18-23.

¹⁵ Cunha F & Heckman J (2007). 'The technology of skill formation', *American Economic Review*, 97:2, 31-47.

¹⁶ The Smith Family (2016). *Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians: The Learning for Life program*, The Smith Family: Sydney.