



*everyone's family*

# Boosting student outcomes in rural and regional Victoria

## Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students

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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 and young people in Australia. 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. Our mission is founded on the belief that every child and young person deserves a chance.

The 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 Victoria we are working in 14 communities, including Bairnsdale, Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Morwell and Shepparton.

In 2017-18, The Smith Family supported more than 170,000 disadvantaged children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals through its education-focussed programs, including over 140,000 children and young people. We are supporting 48,000 financially disadvantaged children and young people nationally on our largest program, the *Learning for Life* educational scholarship. One in five students on the *Learning for Life* program is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background. In Victoria, our programs annually support around 33,000 children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We have a unique longitudinal dataset of young people participating on *Learning for Life*. It includes demographic, administrative and outcomes data. We are tracking the school attendance, school completion and post-school engagement in work and/or study of all young people on the program. We are analysing this data in a systematic way in order to contribute to building the Australian educational evidence base.

### 1. Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the establishment of the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students (the Panel). The Panel's work is important in ensuring Victoria's regional and rural students are able to both improve their educational attainment at school and access quality post-school training, work or study.

There is an increasing national focus on how to better support regional and rural students on their educational journey. Last year, Emeritus Professor Dr John Halsey led the Commonwealth Department of Education's Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (RRR Review) which resulted in the establishment of the Regional Education Expert Advisory Group (Advisory Group). The Panel now has the opportunity to identify the most effective ways to better support Victorian students in regional and rural areas.

Cross-jurisdictional comparisons show that at an aggregate level, Victoria is one of the strongest educational performers in Australia. It has one of the highest rates of learners meeting the milestones upon entry to school and at Year 7. It also has one of the highest national school attendance rates.<sup>1</sup> However, disaggregated data highlights the challenge of reducing the gap in educational attainment between regional and rural students on one hand, and metro students on the other, a challenge also experienced across all other states and territories. Differences based on geographic location between the proportions of children developmentally on track when they start school are relatively small at first, but grow over time.<sup>2</sup> For instance in 2018, 81 per cent of Year 9 students living in outer regional Victoria achieved above the National Minimum Standard for NAPLAN in numeracy, compared to 86 per cent in Victoria's major cities. A total of 76 per cent of Year 9 students living in outer regional Victoria achieved above the National Minimum Standard for NAPLAN in reading compared to 83 per cent in the major cities.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, there are concerning gaps in participation in university and vocational education training (VET) for young Victorians living in regional and rural areas. In 2014, the Victorian Auditor-General found the proportion of 15–24 year olds with a Certificate IV qualification or higher is much lower in rural Victoria, with fewer students going on to university.<sup>4</sup> In 2016, Victoria's *State of the Children* report stated that in Regional Victoria, the proportion of all students leaving school early is higher than equivalent rates in Greater Melbourne.<sup>5</sup> Disadvantaged students are also more likely to leave school early than non-disadvantaged students. Youth unemployment is an associated problem, with, two of Victoria's regional centres, Bendigo and Shepparton, having some of the highest youth unemployment rates in the country.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lamb S, Jackson J, Wastab A, & Huo S (2015), *Educational opportunity in Australia: who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute: Melbourne.

<sup>2</sup> Lamb S, Jackson J, Wastab A, & Huo S (2015), as above.

<sup>3</sup> National Assessment Program, *2018 NAPLAN Results*.

<sup>4</sup> Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Access to Education for Rural Students*, 3 April 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Victorian Department of Education and Training, *The State of Victoria's Children Report 2016*, December 2017, p 75.

<sup>6</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Smashing the Avocado Debate: Australia's Youth Unemployment Hotspots*, March 2019, p 3.

### 2. Delivering education in rural and regional communities

There are identifiable strengths in the current delivery of education in regional and rural communities, and there are also significant structural challenges. These are summarised as follows:

#### *Strengths of educational delivery in regional communities*

- The positive sense of community identity and inclusion that encompasses local students, parents, schools and other members of the public.
- Strong, longstanding local and regional networks that can facilitate greater information sharing and collaboration between service providers. These networks leverage resources in ways which are efficient and can promote innovation tailored to local need.
- Attendance at local schools by multiple generations of family members, which can create deep relationships and personalised knowledge between families and staff.
- The capacity of new and emerging ICT to improve the learning experience of regional students and better overcome geographical distance.

#### *Challenges*

- Geographical distance to main regional and metro centres and the impact this has on the quality of available services.
- Comparatively limited curriculum in schools and weaker connection to post-school pathways for students.
- More limited access to wider range of supports and other related social services for children, young people and their families.
- Difficulty in attracting and retaining teaching and support staff at local schools, leading to problems with workforce capabilities.
- Prohibitive cost of university education and VET for families in regional areas.

Not only can it be difficult for young students in regional and rural settings to stay engaged with their education, they can find it particularly challenging to both imagine their preferred post-school future and identify a way to achieve it.<sup>7</sup> Such difficulties are compounded for regional and rural students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, those experiencing financial disadvantage, or those with a health or disability issue.

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, E. & Foley, A., 'Young people's decision-making as they leave school in non-metropolitan areas in Australia: Insights from those working with young people', Federation University Australia, July 2019.

### 3. Improving educational attainment

Improving educational attainment for regional and rural students requires targeted support to build up foundational skills at school, particularly through high quality early learning and care prior to starting school and in the primary years of schooling. It also requires sustained support to overcome specific local challenges that act as barriers to completing Year 12 and participating in further education after school.

To deliver these types of supports, it is important that schools engage closely with their local community, as recommended by The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools.<sup>8</sup> Actors such as community organisations, employers and tertiary institutions have important roles in school-community engagement, such as by offering mentoring, volunteering and other extra-curricular activities. They can complement and strengthen the work of the local school.

There are range of leading practice programs delivered by non-government organisations designed to engage with, and leverage, the strengths of local communities, in order to tackle the structural challenges with delivering education in a regional and rural settings. We have outlined below examples of such programs that we deliver for consideration by the Panel.

#### *Strengthening foundational skills throughout school*

Critical to ensuring that students in regional Victoria complete school and move on to post-school employment, education and training is that they begin developing foundational skills, such as literacy and numeracy from an early age all the way through to secondary schooling.

Additional specialist support, particularly in the primary years, is important to ensure regional students do not fall behind, because achievement in these areas is predictive of later school completion. Schools are implementing a range of literacy and numeracy strategies. The most effective strategies are the ones complemented by programs that support students to continue to build foundational skills in the home learning environment. Programs, for example, like The Smith Family's *Student2student* program (S2S) support many hundreds of students a year, including in regional and rural communities. The S2S program is an early intervention peer reading program, targeting students in Years 3 to 8, who are up to two years behind in their reading. It matches them with trained reading 'buddies' who are good readers and at least two years older. The pair connect over the phone or online, two to three times a week for an 18-week period. The student reads to their buddy from books provided by The Smith Family, and appropriate to the student's reading level. Given the program happens over the phone or online, the reading buddy can come from outside the student's local community and is particularly relevant for enhancing the reading skills of regional students.

This program is efficiently designed, tailored to student need and very effective. Annual evaluations of the program show that students improve their reading level, enjoy reading more and are reading more frequently following participation in the program. The S2S program supports

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<sup>8</sup> Australian Government, *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, March 2018, p xiii, xv.

improvements in the reading and engagement in learning of children from regional and rural communities.

### *Delivering tailored services responding to local community need*

Education services can be more effectively tailored to meet local community need and to overcome some of the challenges experienced in regional and rural settings. It involves working more closely with families and local schools, given their influence on the choices students make about their post-school futures.

One particularly effective approach is to use brokers. Brokers identify and facilitate the work of local partners in delivering targeted, integrated services in high-need communities. The main benefit of this approach is that it delivers local, customised solutions within an overarching policy framework. It also delivers the following specific advantages:

- *Independence:* the role of brokers is to facilitate local community partners to provide integrated services. As such, brokers have an independence from direct service delivery and are better able to focus on holistic educational outcomes derived from the program. They can be more objective in measuring and evaluating successful and unsuccessful local initiatives, and can effectively allocate resources to programs that are having a positive impact on the ground.
- *Multi-tasking capability:* brokers perform multiple roles. They connect local partners and ensure collaboration across different organisations. They research the needs and aspirations of local children and young people. They communicate effectively, helping to articulate a shared mission and mutual objectives between different organisations, and clearly defining service roles and responsibilities. They enable new, innovative, ambitious service design by sharing research and leading practice across groups and regions, enhancing local capabilities. Lastly, they evaluate the outcomes of local services within the overarching 'big picture' policy framework.
- *Relationship building:* brokers work to forge close, deep and durable relationships with schools and organisations in the local community. This includes ensuring that community organisations have multiple ties within the school, not just with the principal. Relationships are built with key staff such as careers officers and VET coordinators. Brokers also look to maximise the value of pre-existing, longstanding relationships within the school and the community.
- *Accountability and impact:* using brokers helps funders shift away from traditional methods of reporting and accountability, which tends to be input and output focused. Instead, brokers are accountable to funders and other stakeholders for services delivered overall, and outcomes achieved for the community. The emphasis on actions and outcomes, rather than compliance, provides a more conducive context for delivering targeted local services with flexibility and suitable autonomy.

One example of the broker model is using schools as 'community hubs'. Some schools in regional and rural settings function as hubs of community engagement, including sites of multiple service

delivery focused on improving the educational and wellbeing outcomes of students. This approach leverages the longstanding relationships and greater social cohesion often found in regional communities. It is also consistent with the RRR Review, which emphasised the importance of improving transitions into and out of school, as well as strengthening trust between schools and local communities.<sup>9</sup> Some hubs focus on the early years and primary school, while others focus on high school and post-school transitions.

In facilitating services, brokers collaborate closely with schools and utilise the knowledge and networks of a range of local organisations including employers, chambers of commerce, charities and other member-based community groups. Service partners in individual communities can identify the gaps preventing better post-school transitions, such as an over-emphasis on university programs versus relevant TAFE programs, or an overall lack of knowledge of different career pathways. Partners can work with local employers to create, for instance, practical work experience opportunities, career awareness seminars, student business competitions or new apprenticeship programs. This helps link students' secondary studies to post-school opportunities and helps them understand the relevance of their schooling to life beyond secondary education.

Ultimately, proper and sustained delivery of services via a broker model can deliver a range of positive outcomes, including:

- improved attendance, literacy and numeracy levels,
- higher student wellbeing including engagement in school and community, and
- improved access to post-school pathways.

Brokering programs take several years to achieve lasting outcomes for the community, and require sustained commitment and investment from government and other stakeholders over an extended period of time.

#### 4. Improving access to post-school pathways

Supporting regional students to better understand the contemporary labour market, and the range of post-school pathways available to them, is a key part of supporting more of them to complete school and move into employment, further education and training after school. Regional students are less likely to progress to tertiary education and, when they do, they are older, study part-time or online and are more likely to leave their studies before completing a qualification.<sup>10</sup>

The Smith Family believes that young Victorians in regional communities require better careers support as they move through school so they are able to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours to participate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century labour market. For instance, vocational qualification is still misperceived as less valuable compared to university and largely focused on traditional trades. Current data suggests VET graduates have higher employment rates than undergraduates, and earn wages comparable to, if not exceeding, their university educated

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<sup>9</sup> Halsey, Dr John, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education: Final Report*, January 2018, p 9 – 10, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Cherastidham, I. & Norton, A., *Submission to the independent review into regional, rural and remote education*, August 2017, p 9; Victorian TAFE Association, *TAFE for Victoria: Five Policy Priorities for a strong VET sector*, April 2018, p 27.

peers.<sup>11</sup> This is important for post-school pathways for regional and rural students. Victorian TAFEs, for instance, provide equity and access to education and training, with enrolled students more likely to be Indigenous, have a disability, live in a regional or remote area, and come from a low SES background, when compared with private and higher education providers.<sup>12</sup>

The latest evidence demonstrates that there is a strong relationship between student participation in career development activities, including direct exposure to the world of work, and positive attitudes to schooling and post-school involvement in work and study. Young people who can recall four or more structured career activities across their school life, are five times less likely to be unemployed or disengaged from education or training in early adulthood.<sup>13</sup> Engagement with employers helps young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, find out about a wide range of jobs and understand how their learning at school connects to their future. This in turn contributes to them completing school.

There are numerous examples of successful programs, delivered by schools in partnership with charities and not-for-profits in the community sector that support the career aspirations of young people in regional and rural communities and assist them to develop and action plans that realise these aspirations. We would like to draw to the Panel's attention programs that The Smith Family is delivering in regional communities, or can be appropriately scaled to do so, as examples of the type of initiatives that can support improved educational outcomes for young people from these areas.

### *Primary Careers Program*

The Smith Family is currently implementing a pilot program targeting students in Years 4 to 6 which is informed by the latest research showing children begin to form stereotypes about occupations, careers and participation in post-school education from an early age for a range of reasons, including the unconscious influences of parents, friends and others they engage with.<sup>14</sup> Once these limits are set, individuals will rarely consider broader alternatives.

The purpose of the program is to support students to increase their understanding of the 'world of work' by introducing them to a wide variety of jobs and the skill sets needed now and in the future. It aims to broaden students' aspirations about their future and encourages them to remain engaged at school and prepares them for future careers.

The program:

- supports students to better understand their own interests and skills and helps them develop communication, critical thinking, collaboration and creativity skills;

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<sup>11</sup> Wyman, N., McCrindle, M., Whatmore, S., Gedge, J. & Edwards, T. (2017). *Perceptions are not reality: myths, realities & the critical role of vocational education & training in Australia*; Skilling Australia Foundation, Melbourne.

<sup>12</sup> KPMG, *The importance of TAFE to Victoria's prosperity: Final Report*, June 2018, p 8.

<sup>13</sup> Kashhepakdel, E., Mann, A., and Schleicher, M, *The impact of career development activities on student attitudes towards school utility: an analysis of data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*. UK: Education and Employers Research, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> NSW Education and Communities (2014), *The case for career-related learning in primary schools: An introduction to primary school principals*.



- engages students with a range of people from the world of work, from a variety of industry and professions. This helps widen the students' views of the world of work and better understand the transferability of skills across industries and professions;
- helps students create and explore a 'job of the future'. This contributes to enhancing their motivation around the world of work; and
- facilitates students' interaction with peers, teachers, parents and community members around the world of work.

A key resource developed for the program is high quality digital content for students to engage with. This in turn increases the scalability of the program, including the ability to roll the program out in regional areas in an efficacious way.

### *iTrack*

Our *iTrack* online mentoring program is one example of practical program that seeks to combat each of the above barriers. The *iTrack* program is delivered to around 1,000 Year 9 to 11 students per year, including many from regional communities. It matches students with a supportive adult, who provides practical advice and guidance about workplace, study and career opportunities. The mentoring relationship is developed online through weekly chat sessions for approximately an hour a week, for 18 weeks. The program helps students extend the networks of advice that they can draw on, at a key point in their lives. The conversations between the mentor and student encourage the student to do their own research into post-school pathways and to begin formulating a plan for pursuing specific post-school opportunities. This also encourages better ownership of the discussions by the student as they identify the steps needed to implement their post-school plan.

The Smith Family draws volunteer mentors from our corporate and community partners. Mentors are matched with students to ensure the conversations can be as valuable as possible. Mentors are also trained and supervised to ensure their support of students is high quality.

Because the program is online, students from regional areas can access a large and diverse pool of support from a range of locations, including metropolitan areas. This helps overcome the geographical distance and disconnect that young people can experience in regional and rural communities.

For young people in regional communities, connecting with mentors with tertiary education and employment experience, and from different locations, helps them better understand the suite of opportunities available in universities and VET, and to more fully consider which options suit them best. These discussions can also help students see the value and relevance of completing Year 12 and hence can enhance student engagement.

Annual evaluations of the program show that the program has an impact on the young people who participate. Our latest assessment results, from 2017, show that:

- 89 per cent of students explored post school options once they finished the program;
- 85 per cent thought their mentor helped them feel more positive about their future job, career and study options;

- 83 per cent agreed that talking to their mentor has given them more ideas about possible plans for when they finish school; and
- 82 per cent agreed their mentor helped them understand more about how they can reach their career goals.

Students often refer their friends and peers to the program once they have completed it, another indication of the program's effectiveness.

Programs such as *iTrack* are cost-effective and adaptable to many regions, and work best when they are integrated into local school curricula, and when the families and carers of young people understand the relevancy and benefits of the program. The service infrastructure can be rolled out efficiently to support more students in regional areas if additional support and investment were available. This is just one example of how regional students can receive better quality career education and advice.

### *Work Inspiration*

*Work Inspiration* is an example of a program introducing young people to the world of work whilst still at school. The Smith Family has delivered this program in partnership with businesses since 2013 to students from Years 9 to 12, including those in regional and rural communities. It offers them a meaningful, practical opportunity to engage with the world of work, across different industries.

Students spend time in various workplaces, interacting with employees, and learning more about the skillsets required for the particular industry. It helps create pathways for young people within and beyond school. It helps young people in the transition between school, work and/or further study, and helps keep them attached to education and the labour force. Current employers involved in the program include Microsoft, SAP, McDonalds, Hilton Hotels, Arup Engineering, DLA Piper, Audi, Kain Foundation and Flight Centre. Annually around 1,000 students from The Smith Family's partner schools participate in *Work Inspiration*.

### *Career Mentoring Program (CMP)*

The Smith Family offers the CMP for tertiary students entering their final year of higher education and receiving one of our tertiary scholarships. Students are matched with a mentor in their chosen career field who has first-hand experience of breaking into the industry and knowledge of how to navigate career pathways. Mentors are able to provide support, advice and potential networking opportunities over a twelve-month period.

CMP provides students with skills and knowledge to prepare for life after study. Students develop a career plan and a clear sense of actions required to achieve their goals, expand their professional networks, improve their industry insights, develop industry specific job searching skills, and develop their soft skills (including interpersonal skills and an understanding of workplace cultures, practices and behaviours).

The program is flexible and tailored to the individual student's needs. It can also connect students and mentors from different locations including regional communities, similar to *iTrack*. Students and mentors decide how often to meet, how to communicate (e.g. face-to-face, email, online chat and the like) and which particular items to discuss regarding career planning. They are required to

meet for a minimum of twice a semester in person or online; and communicate at least one a month.

Delivering targeted careers education at this stage of the education journey offers one more effective intervention to assist disadvantaged young students to make suitable choices for their lives. This type of program will achieve an effective result when it is paired with other, earlier interventions during primary and secondary school.

Given the fluidity and disruption in the present labour market, effective careers education and support involves preparing young people for multiple careers over their lifetime, not just one. Young people prepared need to be prepared for a non-linear career trajectory in order to best navigate the labour market and create their best future.

### 5. Conclusion

Education is the great enabler in tackling inequality and disadvantage. Children and young people in regional areas, including rural and remote areas, deserve the same opportunities and career pathways as their counterparts in our metropolitan areas. Whilst there are a range of challenges in addressing educational and employment inequality in regional Victoria, with suitably designed and delivered initiatives, these challenges can be diminished.

There are leading practice principles for improving the educational attainment of regional and rural students, including the following:

- providing targeted support to students to improve foundational skills, particularly in early learning and the primary years of schooling;
- delivering tailored services responding to specific local need that actively engage community partners; and
- assisting students to better understand the options and opportunities for post-school education, employment and study throughout school, not just in their final years.

Our submission has identified several programmatic responses aligning to these principles that are proven to succeed, given sustained commitment and investment from governments, business and/or philanthropy over several years. They focus on early intervention to break cycles of disadvantage and to help children and young people in need create a better life for themselves beyond school.

With a greater focus by government, community, philanthropy and business on improving the educational opportunities of young people in regional and rural communities, we are likely to improve not only the lives of the young people themselves, but the prosperity and wellbeing of the wider community. The Smith Family wishes the Panel well in its work, and is happy to expand on this submission at its convenience.