

Submission to the Review of Funding for Schooling



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Paper on Commissioned Research

Organisation: The Smith Family (TSF)

The Smith Family is a national non-government organisation with a sole focus of supporting disadvantaged children and young people to enhance their engagement in learning, and in turn to contribute to them achieving improved educational outcomes. We are a large provider of educational programs targeting this group, working with over 100,000 children and young people each year including intensively with over 33,000 low SES school and tertiary students.

As a key player in this sector, were it not for a transition in organisational leadership, we would have provided a response to the Review's earlier discussion paper. The Smith Family commends the Review for commissioning four significant and comprehensive research reports. They will be of benefit not only to the Review but more widely. We welcome the opportunity to provide comments on the research reports prepared to support the Review's deliberations.

Influences on children's wellbeing and educational outcomes

Research confirms the multiple influences that impact on children and young people's wellbeing and educational outcomes. These influences include personal characteristics and attributes; family; peers; institutions such as schools; and the community in which they live. These can impact on a young person's attitudes towards education and learning; their aspirations; and the resources and networks they can draw on.

In the Australian context, educational policy and program initiatives have varied in the emphasis they have put on the range of influences that impact on young people's educational outcomes. Most have focused on the individual student; increasingly there has been a focus on the institution of the school and in teacher quality in particular; some initiatives have had a focus on peers, others on the role of parents and the family in school engagement. TSF would argue in light of its work with low SES students, particularly those living in highly disadvantaged communities, that what is required are initiatives which are able to integrate a focus on the *range* of influences that impact on a young person's educational outcomes.

School and community partnerships

In addition TSF would strongly argue that whilst there has been some focus on school and community partnerships, this has to date been a relatively under-developed area in Australia. Such partnerships reflect that learning and education are the responsibility of the community as a whole and not schools alone. These partnerships can and should include a facilitated role for businesses to contribute to the enhancement of key outcomes such as keeping young people engaged in learning and assisting their smooth transition from school to work or further education. The size of the educational equity challenge facing Australia, the increasing complexity faced by schools with high numbers of low SES students, and the clear need for them to be able to leverage resources, skills and support from beyond the school system, demands a policy and programmatic environment that facilitates and promotes strong, long-term and genuine school-community partnerships.

A number of school-community partnership approaches are currently being implemented around Australia, such as the Extended School Hub pilot being run by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. In TSF's experience, including through the

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Victorian Extended School Hub pilot, in which we are having a key leadership and facilitation role, there are a number of factors required if school-community partnerships are to achieve long term benefits for the students, schools, institutions and communities involved. These factors include:

- Shared objectives for the partnership
- Stable leadership committed to achieving the shared objectives
- Good governance structures, including for example Executive Steering Group arrangements which include school principals, senior staff from the Education department, and senior staff from key NGOs and other partners
- Strategic partners from across a range of sectors and agencies, including those able to 'bring in' resources from outside the community. This could include educational institutions, business, local government, NGOs, etc
- A suite of initiatives that take into account the range of influences that impact on the educational outcomes of low SES students.
- Funding arrangements which provide a degree of flexibility and are guaranteed for a significant period of time.
- Use of up-to-date data to inform planning.
- Commitment to evaluation, reflection and ongoing improvement, with this being built in to the initiative from the start.

A role for non-government organisations

TSF would also argue that it is not always necessary or indeed desirable for the education system to be identified as the 'facilitator' or 'driver' of such partnerships and that non-government organisations can and do play a key role in facilitating the deep and long term school-community relationships which ultimately contribute to improving the wellbeing of children and young people. Having organisations such as NGOs acting as the facilitator or 'lead agency' in such initiatives reduces the burden of partnership development and management on school staff.

Of particular relevance to the Review of Funding is that the policy and programmatic environments, including funding, are enhanced to more proactively support these types of partnerships. It is TSF's view that schools should have the ability to internally resource partnership managers or engage non profit intermediaries to assist them to manage these types of partnerships.

Assessment of current process for targeting of schools funding to disadvantaged students – Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

1. Comments on ACER's "Assessment of current process for targeting of schools funding to disadvantaged students" research report

There are a range of areas covered within the ACER report that The Smith Family (TSF) would like to make comment on and/or endorse based on our long-term practice and research experience working to enhance the learning outcomes for children from low SES background. For ease of reading, page references to the section being commented on are provided.

Comprehensive approach to redressing educational disadvantage (p 7)

TSF's work confirms the need for additional funding to be seen as part of a comprehensive and long-term approach. In particular, as identified in our introductory comments such additional funding should include a strong school-community focus.

Low SES definitional issues (p 17)

TSF notes the varied measures of SES used by educational authorities around Australia as well as the inherent challenges in developing a measure suitable to a nation as geographically diverse as Australia. It also notes the potential enhancements to the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantaged (ICSEA) currently being developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority.

Notwithstanding the challenges of developing a SES measure, accurate and useful data collection is a critical requirement for effective policy and program development and monitoring and TSF urges that work to develop such a measure be seen as a priority task. Whilst noting the additional challenges of developing a multi-component measure, a single item measure (eg family income or parental occupation) will not provide an adequate tool on which systems, sectors and schools can plan. The importance of using data collected as close to real time as possible is strongly endorsed. TSF's experience is that policies and programs both at the systemic or local level which have to rely on Census data which may be several years old is problematic, particularly in areas such as greenfield sites or where significant population change, including population decline, is occurring.

Funding available for Low SES students (p 35 and p 83)

TSF notes the relatively modest expenditure allocated by Governments to low SES students, both in absolute terms and relative to the other disadvantaged groups for which targeted funding is allocated. It is also mindful of the constrained fiscal environments in which both Commonwealth and State/Territory governments are operating. Notwithstanding this, the long-term social and economic costs of not enhancing the educational outcomes achieved by low SES students at an aggregate level are clear. As Access Economics noted in its 2005 Report "Education is increasingly becoming the 'engine room' of modern economies. If we get this part of the economy right, most other things ought to fall into place (or be better placed), because increased investment in education boosts both productivity and participation." This report found that increasing the Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate to 90%, would increase GDP by 1.1% by 2040, clearly justifying in economic terms such an investment.

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The social and economic benefits both for individuals and the community as a whole, warrants an increased concentrated investment for an identified period of time in residualised schools within low SES communities. Such investment should be for a sustained period, including up to 10 years if required, and be accompanied by monitoring and accountability mechanisms to track progress. Change in such schools is not likely to occur through short one or two year investments but a significant return on investment is likely with sustained support. Selecting the schools in which to make this investment will require a sophisticated analysis of a range of factors, including demographics, school leadership, and the local community context.

Evaluation of programs for disadvantaged groups (p 59)

TSF has a strong organisational commitment to implementing evidence and practice informed programs and to developing and implementing a strong research and evaluation culture. As such, it is both aware of the challenges of evaluating programs in the educational arena, but also convinced of the importance of such evaluation. TSF therefore notes with some concern the small percentage of programs targeting disadvantaged groups, including those for low SES, which have been evaluated. This concern is reinforced by the fact that of those programs which have been evaluated some evaluations have not included measures regarding their impact on student learning. Whilst noting the ACER survey of educational authorities indicated that respondents believed 121 out of 143 programs were 'good practice', in the absence of more formal evidence, significant uncertainty regarding the programs' effectiveness remains. These programs represent a major national investment aimed at enhancing the short and long term outcomes of disadvantaged students across Australia. As such, governments and the wider community need to have greater confidence in the efficacy of the programs being implemented.

TSF would therefore strongly argue for increased focus and investment in the evaluation of programs targeting disadvantaged groups, particularly those targeting low SES students/schools or communities. Such evaluation should be 'front-loaded' into the initiative rather than be seen as an afterthought or add on. These evaluations should also be undertaken over the timeframe in which change is likely to be able to be identified and include a participatory component, whereby the views of those being targeted by the initiative are sought and given appropriate weight. Particular attention should be given to assessing and tracking sustainable change ie whether improved outcomes are sustained over time. Given adequate resources such evaluations should be possible given the length of time over which these programs run and the length of time students are engaged in education.

Broadband equity program (p 48-52)

TSF supports the move to a broadband equity approach which has seen an increased focus on outputs/outcomes and enabled greater flexibility in the use of educational funds. Our work in schools throughout Australia has made us particularly aware of the positive impact of the National Partnership Literacy and Numeracy Program and the Smarter Schools National Partnership funding. The latter has supported initiatives such as the Extended Schools Hub pilots in Victoria. The systemic challenge remains how to scale up pilot initiatives shown to be effective in a way that takes into account the local nuances of schools and communities. There is a national leadership role that the Commonwealth can play in supporting the

knowledge brokering arrangements that would support such scaling.

Targeted programs to develop management capacity & core sector expertise to support schools (p50)

TSF supports the allocation of some funds 'centrally' to support the development of capacity across system/sectors, rather than having all funds allocated to the local level. Such central allocations however should have clear KPIs/deliverables and be used for initiatives that include supporting approaches that enhance community and parent engagement in schools.

Regional/rural/remote (p 84)

TSF has experience working in regional/rural/remote communities and as such is aware of the complex needs of many students in these areas, including issues that go beyond educational need and relate to students' physical and mental health. This is particularly the case in remote areas. TSF is also aware of the additional training and support needs of the teaching workforce operating in these communities.

Many of the students in remote schools are Indigenous and many have English as a second or even third or fourth language. The lack of a range of support services to complement the school's educational focus also means that students rely more heavily on the school to address a broad range of health and other needs. Students in remote communities require teachers with a specific range of skills to address their more complex needs and who are able to utilise pedagogies appropriate to them. Yet staff are difficult to attract and positions in remote schools can go unfilled for terms.

As part of the review of school funding and in order to more effectively meet the needs of students in remote areas, TSF proposes that the Commonwealth Government consider establishing a remote teaching service to ensure staff with the necessary skills that will meet students' needs are available. Such a service would have responsibility for identifying the incentives, service conditions and servicing models required to properly support remote students. The proposal to establish a remote teaching service would require significant investment and innovation but assist both the Commonwealth and COAG achieve the school participation outcomes they are committed to, particularly some of those under the *Closing the Gap* initiative.

In addition, as noted by the ACER report 'specific strategies are needed to support regional/rural/remote schools. For example...linking rural and remote students with peers, opportunities and role models in other areas...'. TSF has extensive experience providing a range of mentoring initiatives for students from low income families, including in non-metro settings. This includes the innovative *iTrack* program, an online, school based, one-on-one, mentoring program for students in Years 9–11 requiring support as they move through secondary education. Trained mentor volunteers assist students with their post school plans. The mentoring relationship is developed online in regular weekly chat sessions of around an hour per week, and continues for two school terms. Such programs are particularly important for students from regional/remote/rural communities where there may be less access to role models and individuals who can support young people to expand their aspirations. Initiatives such as *iTrack* enable additional resources from beyond the local school and community to be harnessed. Funding for regional/remote/rural students needs to ensure that there is capacity to support some of the more innovative and specific strategies required to support positive student outcomes.

Funding for Indigenous students

TSF currently supports well over 4,000 Indigenous children and young people through its Learning for Life Scholarships, as well as significant numbers of other Indigenous young people through its suite of Learning for Life programs. This experience, coupled with our knowledge of other relevant work and research, has led us to identify 6 key themes which we see as critical to our work of supporting Indigenous young people in schools:

- Governance and leadership – including strong partnerships between schools and a range of other government and non-government organisations and individuals
- Making the school a welcoming place for Indigenous parents, teachers and community members
- Providing comprehensive support that meets the multiple needs of students, including support for their families.
- Having high expectations for Indigenous students and working with them to develop and realise high aspirations
- A focus on school achievement, not just school attendance
- Recognising the importance of educational opportunities for both genders.

These themes need to be supported by policies, programs and funding. One initiative that TSF is piloting which aims to support Indigenous girls to achieve better educational outcomes and has a focus on the themes identified above is the *Girls at the Centre* initiative. Women play a critical role in the economic growth of communities, particularly Indigenous communities, and as such The Smith Family sees the need for a stronger policy and programmatic focus on gender equity for young Indigenous girls. *Girls at the Centre* is a school-based initiative operating in Alice Springs which provides an integrated range of components including coaches, curriculum enhancement, life goal setting, life skills development, connections to work and training opportunities, and the Families and Schools Together (FAST) initiative. FAST is a parent involvement and prevention program which strengthens the critical family/school relationship. *Girls at the Centre* is currently being externally evaluated but data to date suggests the program is supporting improved school attendance and educational engagement, important stepping stones to achieving enhanced learning outcomes.

As with supporting regional/remote/rural students, there is also a clear need to support workforce development so that educational leaders and staff working with Indigenous students use pedagogies that understand and embrace Indigenous knowledge and culture. As with the range of disadvantaged programs generally, there is also the need for a much stronger focus on building an evidence base for what is effective in supporting better educational outcomes for Indigenous students and supporting staff to understand and implement the evidence base. TSF also supports the need for direct student data for Indigenous programs and that this be at both an individual and school level for monitoring purposes.

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Assessing existing funding models for schooling in Australia – Deloitte Access Economics

2. Comments on Deloitte Access Economics' "Assessing existing funding models for schooling in Australia" research report
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The Smith Family has no specific comments to make on this report.

Feasibility of a national schooling recurrent resource standard – The Allen Consulting Group

3. Comments on The Allen Consulting Group's "Feasibility of a national schooling recurrent resource standard" research report

The Smith Family has no specific comments to make on this report.

Schooling challenges and opportunities– The Nous Group

4. Comments on The Nous Group's "Schooling challenges and opportunities" research report

There are a range of areas covered within the Nous report that TSF would like to make comment on and/or endorse. It would again reinforce its initial remarks about the importance of the school-community focus.

Dual goal of high performance and high equity

TSF strongly endorses the dual goal for Australia's education system of high performance and high equity identified by the report. This is in line with Australia's national values and there are demonstrable social and economic benefits that will ensue from such a joint focus. The fact that nations such as Canada have achieved such a dual focus should provide Australia both with encouragement that it can be achieved and an incentive for extra effort in this regard.

Lifting the whole system

TSF notes the disproportionate representation of low SES students in government schools but also the proportion of under-performing students across the sectors. We therefore endorse a focus on lifting the performance of the system as a whole while wanting to ensure this does not exacerbate existing gaps in performance between sectors.

Principles for reform

TSF endorses the three principles identified by the Nous report as well as the definitions attached to each, namely that what is known to work should be applied in a comprehensive, integrated and sustainable way. TSF would particularly endorse the view that a 'comprehensive' approach must include thinking 'about other external contributors to a student or school's success...and what can the local community do not just for a school but for all schools in a region.' (p9) As identified in our opening comments, TSF works extensively in disadvantaged communities, many of which have experienced entrenched and multi-generational disadvantage. It therefore strongly endorses the view that approaches need to be implemented in a sustainable way and that this includes providing sufficient time for reforms to work.

Levers for improvement

TSF notes the 6 levers for improvement and offers the following comments with respect to them.

Improving quality of teachers and practice of teaching

This should include a stronger focus on pedagogies that support Indigenous students and regional/remote/rural students as identified in the response (above) to the ACER report. It should also include supporting teachers to develop the skills to work with a range of other professionals, disciplines and supports, including NGOs, given the needs of the students they are working with. Community consultation and engagement are core skills if educational equity is to be enhanced and is an area in which NGOs in particular can provide support.

Ensuring the right external standards of governance

TSF supports the view that external standards of governance should not just include academic assessments such as NAPLAN, given the broad role that schools have in promoting the wellbeing of children and young people. Measures such as student and parent

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satisfaction which are collected in some jurisdictions should also be seen as important measures of performance. Strategies which support groups less likely to participate in such surveys (eg those from disadvantaged backgrounds) should be developed.

Regional level collaboration and networked schools

Our earlier comments regarding the school-community focus and our experience with related policy and program responses such as *Communities for Children* which is administered by FaHCSIA, endorse the value of a more networked and regional level approach to education. The key role that NGOs can play in these arrangements should be supported and facilitated through such arrangements.

Support for disadvantaged students

TSF's work with thousands of low income students, families and schools, coupled with the available international evidence, confirms the importance of increasing engagement with parents. NGOs can and do play an important role in enhancing that engagement. TSF's work also confirms the need for integrated support for students to fill gaps that may occur in home based support. Given the diverse and complex range of needs that disadvantaged students may have, NGOs have been shown to be particularly well placed to coordinate or facilitate the broad range of supports required by disadvantaged students. In this way NGOs can complement the educational focus and expertise of educational staff, for whom this broader facilitation role may not be a core competency.

The *Impact* initiative is an example of a TSF project which is providing integrated support for disadvantaged students. The three year pilot is providing ongoing support to students in Years 8 as they move through to Years 9 and 10 to ensure they remain engaged in education. Research has shown that students aged 13-16 years of age are at risk of disengaging from education and this is a time when young people start to shift their ambitions and build their aspirations. Program components include a financial scholarship; a weekly *Impact Club* through which they develop a range of skills and knowledge linked to the school curriculum; inspirational speakers; a global citizenship program; leadership camp; and parent events. The initiative is being externally evaluated over the three year period.

TSF also runs a range of programs which aim to enhance educational outcomes for disadvantaged students through mentoring. One of our largest such initiatives is *Student2student* (S2S) which matches students who need support to improve their reading with peer mentors who have been trained to help them develop literacy skills in others. S2S works with students in Years 3 to 8 who have been assessed as being up to two years behind in their reading development and the mentors are at least two years older than the student they are paired with. The mentoring support is generally provided via regular telephone contact. This support includes the student reading to their mentor. S2S supports well over 1,000 students each year across Australia and regular evaluation has shown the effectiveness of the program. The 2011 evaluation shows for example, that 81% of S2S students who completed the Burt Reading Test improved their reading after participating in the program, and three quarters of students agreed that the program helped them feel more confident with their school work.

TSF also runs a network of Learning Clubs across Australia which support close to 3,000 children and young people to enhance their learning outcomes, particularly in the areas of

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literacy and numeracy. Learning Clubs provide a safe supportive out-of-school hours environment where students have the opportunity to access support and resources with a learning focus. Over half of TSF's Learning Clubs are located in schools with a number of others being run in places such as community centres. As with many of TSF's initiatives the Learning Clubs involve trained volunteers, including university students, and harness a range of additional resources available within the community to support improved educational outcomes. They are the type of initiatives which can help support disadvantaged students to achieve improved educational outcomes and hence policy and program frameworks which support such initiatives are required.

Invest in under-performing schools

As identified above in responding to the ACER report, TSF strongly supports significant investment in those schools which are under-performing. In addition to those comments, research undertaken by the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW in collaboration with TSF and a range of other organisations confirms the impact that a lack of school amenity can have on young people. This research interviewed close to 100 young people experiencing economic adversity in a range of communities across Australia. The research notes:

“Young people wanted their learning environments to be “presented well” and not vandalised. Where schools were poorly maintained young people were less likely to articulate a strong sense of themselves as learners, and those that did often went to some length to tell us how they could be successful at school in what they saw as a difficult environment... Wherever young people were in poor quality environments they expressed the idea that being schooled in conditions that communicated a lack of esteem created a self perpetuating cycle of disrespect for the environment as one girl commented “because if students saw, I reckon, if they saw that it was better then they would treat it better”. The material environments of young people’s lives communicate to them the value society and its institutions place on them and poor quality environments are detrimental to their well-being.”
Making a difference, Building on young people’s experiences of economic adversity, Draft Final Report, 2011 SPRC

TSF therefore strongly endorses the need to invest in the physical infrastructure of under-performing schools. Such investment alone will not ensure improved outcomes but it is a critical component. It is particularly important given its impact on students’ self esteem and the link they make between poor infrastructure and the value society places on them. Evidence of this is to be seen in the recently re-built Hume Central Secondary College in Victoria and the contribution the physical design is making to student wellbeing and learning outcomes. The campus incorporates leading edge design with the latest thinking in teaching and learning to give students access to a contemporary environment. For further information see <http://www.humecentralsc.vic.edu.au/>

Strong leadership

TSF endorses the need for strong leadership and the key role principals have. Increasingly principals and their staff are being asked to take on more and more functions, a number of them (such as the facilitation and coordination role mentioned above) which may be outside their core expertise or comfort zone. Community engagement may well be one of those areas for many educational staff. Principals and staff need to be supported to undertake

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such engagement and new models of governance found to support such initiatives. As outlined earlier governance arrangements which support school-community partnerships and enable shared leadership can result in a range of new skills being brought to the school environment, often facilitated by NGOs. There is increasing evidence that such facilitated models which bring a range of skills and expertise from across sectors can contribute to enhanced outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people.

Supplementary comments

5. Other comments on the Review of Funding for Schooling commissioned research

References:

The economic benefit of increased participation in education and training, Access Economics, 2005

Making a difference, Building on young people's experiences of economic adversity, Draft Final Report, 2011 SPRC