



everyone's family

Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs

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There has been considerable investment by numerous organisations and sectors over many years, in a range of initiatives and programs aimed at improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. To date however, despite much goodwill, effort and investment, progress has not been as strong as would be hoped or anticipated.

The outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people remain below that of their non-Aboriginal peers, at every stage of the educational journey. This is shown by data including the Australian Early Development Census, school attendance rates, NAPLAN, Year 12 completion and post school engagement in employment or study.

Contributing to this has, in part, been a generally too limited focus on robust and longitudinal evaluation and assessment of the outcomes achieved by various initiatives. There has also been limited longer-term investment in those initiatives which have been shown to be effective or have shown some promise. There have been many pilot programs, a too limited appreciation of the diverse circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and a limited capacity to efficiently scale effective programs.

This submission brings together:

- Some of the existing research and evaluation on how to improve the educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.
- The strong practice experience of The Smith Family, a national non-government organisation whose mission is to support disadvantaged young Australians to achieve educationally.

Some of the successful strategies for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to achieve educationally which are identified from this research and practice include:

- **Long-term**, targeted and **holistic support** for young people.
- A culture of **high aspirations** and expectations and a **strengths** based approach.
- **Parental, family and community engagement**, including cross-sectoral partnerships. This includes working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, respected and recognised leaders, parents, teachers and community leaders. It also includes acknowledging that educators/schools alone cannot be held responsible for improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.
- **Flexible** and **nuanced support** that takes into account individual, school and community needs, resources and dynamics.

- Use of **data, research and evaluation** to inform program design, development and continuous improvement. This includes longitudinal evaluation, identifying what works and what doesn't work and using this to build the body of evidence regarding how to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Australia can and must do better in providing educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and support them to reach their full potential right across the education spectrum. This Inquiry has an important role to play in identifying those strategies and models which have been most successful and thereby inform ongoing public policy and program development in this critical area.

Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes this Inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The Smith Family strongly supports the Inquiry's underlying premise that 'education is the key for all Australians to realise their life goals and to become financially independent'.¹

The Smith Family particularly welcomes the Inquiry's focus on identifying the best opportunities and pathways to assist Indigenous students to succeed in school, regardless of where they live. A nuanced understanding of what works for different students is critical if Australia is to have the policy and programmatic responses needed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to succeed educationally.

An important context for this is that around 80% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians live in non-remote areas.² While acknowledging the particularly poor educational outcomes of young Aboriginal people living in remote areas, a too narrow or exclusive focus on these young people, will miss the significant opportunity which also exists to improve the outcomes of the many Aboriginal young people who live in non-remote areas. Efforts aimed at improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people need to be cognisant of their geographical spread and concentration.

The importance of this Inquiry is highlighted by educational data which shows that, while some progress is being made to close the gap between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, there is still a considerable way to go. Australian Early Development Census data, school attendance rates, NAPLAN and Year 12 completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are all below that of their non-Aboriginal peers.

This submission brings together some of the existing relevant research and evaluation on improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, as well as the strong practice experience of The Smith Family, a large national non-government organisation whose mission is to support disadvantaged young Australians to achieve educationally.

¹ Hon. Sharman Stone MP, Chair of the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, Media Alert, 18 September 2015.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015) 'The Indigenous Population', *Indigenous Observatory*, Australian Government, viewed 22 December 2015, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous-observatory/reports/health-and-welfare-2015/indigenous-population/>

There is a range of research which highlights what works and what doesn't work to support improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. This includes:

- **Balanced long-term early intervention**
Nobel Economist, Professor James Heckman, has shown that efforts aimed at improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young people are most cost effective if they involve balanced long-term support across a young person's life. The same amount of investment distributed more evenly over the life cycle of a child produces more adult skills than a policy that focuses on one part of a young person's life, for example the early years or adolescence. A sustained and early intervention approach is far more cost effective than one-off or short term programs for young people, or remedial efforts aimed at preparing adults for the workforce.³
- **Parental engagement**
Parental engagement in children's learning is a bigger predictor of how children do in school than a family's socio-economic status. Students with engaged parents, no matter what their income or background is, are more likely to do well at school, graduate from school and go on to higher education. Parental engagement in learning is one tool that can help to close the gap in achievement between children of different socio-economic backgrounds.⁴

There is however, sometimes a dissonance between what Indigenous parents expect the level of engagement in their child's school should be, and what the policy community assumes about the importance of engagement. Parents' visible engagement with schools and the importance they place on education are different matters. Indigenous parents who are least 'visible' in the school are not necessarily marginalised from the school. Non-visibility does not equate with a lack of interest or lack of participation in schooling. Engagement efforts with Indigenous parents should focus on helping them to invest in the cognitive and emotional development of their children toward academic attainment.⁵

³ F. Cunha & J. Heckman (2007) 'The Technology of Skill Formation', *American Economic Review, American Economic Association*, Vol 97(2), pp. 31-47.

⁴ S. Fox & A. Olsen (2014) *Defining Parental Engagement*, ACT Department of Education and Training: Canberra.

⁵ Richard Chenhall et al (2011) *Parent-school engagement: Exploring the concept of 'invisible' Indigenous parents in three north Australian school communities*, The Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University, Darwin.

- **Poor school attendance**
Poor school attendance contributes to lower academic achievement, making it more difficult to successfully complete school. Observable characteristics (such as location, health and socioeconomic background) explain some, but not all, of the difference in attendance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. A range of individual, school and family characteristics are important, some of which may be unique to, or more salient for, Indigenous students, or some groups of Indigenous students.⁶
- **Teachers matter but they are not the only thing that matters.**
Professor John Hattie has shown that **students and their home/family** account for about 60 percent of the variance in student achievement outcomes. Teachers account for about 30 percent of this variance.⁷
- **Shared responsibility**
Advances in educational outcomes depend on shifting responsibility from educators alone to include not only parents, but also the different tiers of government and other organisations (non-government, corporate and philanthropy) that respond to the social and economic circumstances of families.⁸
- Factors which **contribute to** school completion include:
 - i. A **school culture and leadership** that acknowledges and supports Indigenous students and families. This includes: a shared vision for the school community; high expectations of success for both staff and students; a learning environment that is responsive to individual needs; a drive for continuous improvement; involvement of the Indigenous community in planning and providing education.
 - ii. **School wide strategies** that work to maintain student engagement and improve learning outcomes. This includes: broad curriculum provision; quality vocational education and training options; school absenteeism and attendance programs; quality career education.
 - iii. **Student focussed strategies** that directly meet the needs of students at risk of low achievement or early school leaving. These include: targeted skill development, mentoring, school engagement programs, welfare support, intensive case management.⁹

⁶ N. Biddle (2014) *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth* CAEPR Working Paper No 94/2014, The Australian National University: Canberra.

⁷ John Hattie (2003) 'Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?' Paper presented at the *Australian Council for Educational Research Annual Conference on Building Teacher Quality*. Melbourne

⁸ Chenhall (2011).

⁹ S. Helme and S. Lamb (2011) *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students*, Resource sheet no 6 for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government: Canberra.

- Strategies which are **not effective** in increasing engagement, achievement or completion rates for Indigenous students include:
 - i. A **one size** fits all approach that either treats Indigenous students the same as non-Indigenous students or assumes that all Indigenous young people are the same.
 - ii. **Short-term** or **piecemeal** interventions that are not funded adequately or implemented for long enough to make a significant impact.
 - iii. Interventions that are adopted **without considering local needs** and collaborating with Indigenous communities
 - iv. Attempting to solve the problem of leaving school early without dealing with its **underlying causes** and providing sustained institutional support.¹⁰

Importantly, Helme and Lamb (2011) also identified five key areas where there were limitations to the available research, evaluation and evidence:

- There is **insufficient evidence** demonstrating the effectiveness of many programs that are designed to improve the outcomes for Indigenous young people.
- Much of the work undertaken has been short term and piecemeal, or has **not** been evaluated in a **robust** way.
- There is **insufficient longitudinal data** that tracks the progress of Indigenous individuals and accurately measures the effects of different approaches. Further, Indigenous samples within longitudinal studies are small, which makes it difficult to generalise on the basis of such limited information.
- Little information is available on the **conditions** needed for programs to work – on resources, quality of implementation and the sorts of arrangements on which interventions or strategies work or not (facilitators and inhibitors).
- As much of the research describes outcomes for Indigenous students as a whole, there is insufficient evidence on outcomes for particular types or **subgroups** of Indigenous students.¹¹

¹⁰ S. Helme and S. Lamb (2011) *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students*, Resource sheet no 6 for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government: Canberra.

¹¹ S. Helme and S. Lamb (2011)

This section gives some background on The Smith Family, a large national organisation supporting disadvantaged children's long-term participation in education. It also identifies the guiding principles which underpin our work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and some of the organisational structures which support this work.

Our mission

The Smith Family's mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their education. We are Australia's largest education-oriented charity and deliver programs in 94 communities across all states and territories.

In the 2014-2015 financial year we supported around 125,000 disadvantaged children and young people, their parents/carers and community professionals. This included over 14,400 children, young people and their carers who are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Approach and geographical spread

The Smith Family takes an ecological and place-based approach to its work. We take into account the multiple factors which research has shown influence children and young people's outcomes:

- **Personal characteristics** eg social skills, intelligence, health, self esteem, aspirations
- **Family** eg resources, parental aspirations, engagement in child's learning
- **Peers** eg their aspirations, attitudes to education, risk taking behaviour
- **Learning and care institutions** eg teacher quality, student mix, leadership, school's expectations
- **Community and societal** eg economic and infrastructure resources, role models, social cohesion, safety, valuing of equity.¹²

The communities in which The Smith Family works are included in the Appendix. The vast majority of these communities are in the outer areas of Australia's capital cities or in regional areas. While The Smith Family does not generally work in remote areas of Australia, it is working in many communities with high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. This includes western Sydney, Alice Springs, Dubbo, Inala, Kwinana, Port Augusta, Rockhampton and Shepparton.

¹² U. Bronfenbrenner (1979) *The ecology of human development*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge.

Guiding principles

The Smith Family has identified seven guiding principles which underpin our work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians:

1. We seek the **involvement, advice and guidance** of people with expertise and acknowledge their contribution. Wherever possible, we work on the evidence-based understanding that for sustainable improvement in educational achievement and wellbeing, working together with Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander Elders, Respected and Recognised Leaders, Parents, Teachers and Community Leaders (among others) will be crucial.
2. We are working towards **effective practice** and will wherever possible follow agreed principles for investments and soft entry pathways that promote a sustainable and inclusive approach in the delivery and/or design of services in urban, regional and remote locations.
3. We understand that achieving impact will **take time** to build trusting relationships. We adopt a **'whole of community'** generational approach that focuses on building the developmental capacity of a place or community in a sustainable manner, that promotes respect and understanding for how ideas and concepts relate to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems.
4. We adopt a **strengths-based** approach, appreciating that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians have expert knowledges, skills and abilities, and the potential to develop other skills and capacity to address issues, develop and design programs and deliver them.
5. We build **trusting relationships**, connecting people, resources and ideas. Within the spirit of working together and the power of possibilities in relationships, we also aim, wherever possible, to work together to build the capacity of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander managed organisations and promote opportunities for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employment.
6. We are **transparent and accountable** in managing complex community-based systems of collaboration and action. Our accountability for outcomes is to Elders, families, communities, supporters, school principals, staff, school councils and community leaders as well as to our corporate and government business partners and others.
7. As an evidence-based organisation we incorporate appropriate **evaluation** processes to ensure that we have the highest standards of transparency and risk management in providing support together in our communities.

Reconciliation Action Plan

The Smith Family's 2013-16 Reconciliation Action Plan is its second and builds on our earlier three year foundation plan. The Plan has a series of commitments, targets and timeframes which are embedded in the organisation's business frameworks. There are clear responsibilities and reporting arrangements for the Plan.

Advisory Group

The Smith Family has an Advisory Group on issues concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians which provides direct advice to inform the work of the organisation. The role of the Advisory Group and its membership are included in the Appendix.

Staff training, development and support

All The Smith Family staff undertake mandatory cultural awareness training, including refresher programs to support them to develop the cultural competence required to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their families. The training encompasses:

- **Interactive Ochre** – which aims to foster and develop inclusive work practices and learning.
- **Share our Pride** – an online learning tool developed by Reconciliation Australia and designed to provide all Australians with an appreciation of the history and cultures of Australia's First Peoples.

Quarterly **Practice Sit-In meetings** are held to provide a regular opportunity to team members who work closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This provides a cross functional practice learning opportunity to:

- Share information about programs and approaches
- Provide an opportunity for staff to further collaborate on practices around engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and organisations
- Provide a safe and open conversation forum for staff to seek advice and/or information on issues arising
- Provide a point of collaboration for our policy and program offering to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families.

The Smith Family has a range of programs supporting around 14,400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their parents/carers. In order that the Inquiry can draw on our experience of working with these families, further information is provided below on three of these programs:

1. Learning for Life
2. Girls at the Centre
3. Indigenous Youth Leadership Program

1. *Learning for Life* scholarship program

The largest of The Smith Family's programs is *Learning for Life*, a long-term educational scholarship program. In the 2014-15 financial year, close to 6,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were supported on a *Learning for Life* scholarship. This is 17.5% of all young people supported by the program¹³, an increase from 14.9% in 2012-13. This increase is ahead of the 5,500 target set out in our Reconciliation Action Plan.

The *Learning for Life* scholarship aims to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people and prepare them to participate economically and socially in the Australian community. Drawing on the research on what works to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people, it is a balanced long-term approach which has parental engagement at its core.

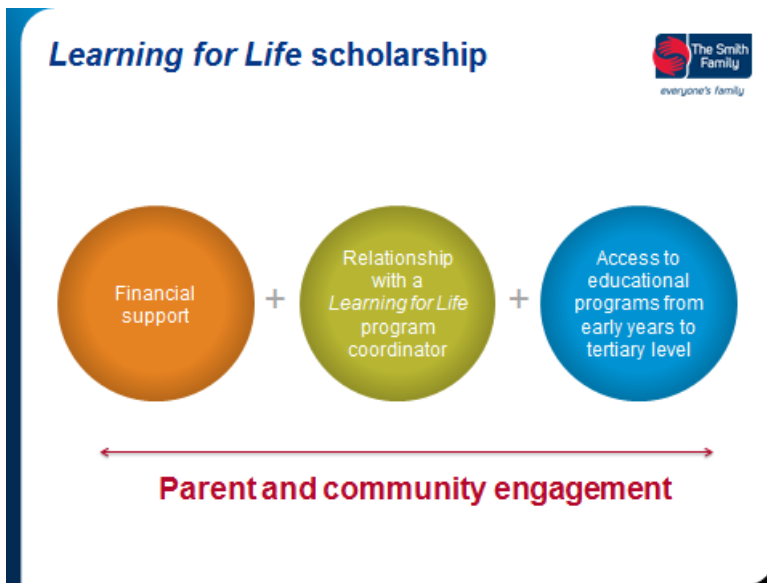
Students can begin on the scholarship in the first year of school and continue right through school and tertiary education. It is complemented by early literacy and early mathematics programs (*Let's Read* and *Let's Count*) which support children to develop key skills, prior to starting school.

Over half of the secondary students who are on the *Learning for Life* program have participated for five or more years. *Learning for Life* students attend disadvantaged schools in disadvantaged communities, with analysis of Department of Education data showing that, as a group, they are *more* disadvantaged than their peers in the same school.

Figure 1 identifies the components of *Learning for Life*.

¹³ In 2014-15, over 34,000 students from financially disadvantaged families were supported by the program.

Figure 1: *Learning for Life*



Learning for Life has three integrated components:

- A **modest biannual payment** to families, to cover education related expenses, such as books, uniforms and excursions. Payments range from \$420 to \$679 per year depending on the student's school year level.
- A ***Learning for Life* Program Coordinator**, (a Smith Family staff member), who works with the family to support their child's long-term participation in education.
- **Programs** from the early years to the tertiary level to help ensure engagement in education. They include literacy and numeracy programs, mentoring, learning clubs and career activities. They build foundational skills, enhance aspirations and expand the students' networks around education, careers and employment. These shorter programs are tailored to different educational stages and student needs.

Each *Learning for Life* student is matched with a sponsor (an individual Australian who provides a regular contribution which assists with the student's educational expenses) and communicate with them by mail on a regular basis. The student-sponsor relationship contributes to the student staying engaged in education - having someone the student doesn't know invest in their education can be a powerful motivator for completing school.

Parental engagement is a core feature of the program. The Smith Family enters into a formal signed agreement with parents, which acknowledges a mutual commitment to supporting students' long term educational participation. The agreement is underpinned by the principles of reciprocity and high expectations regarding school attendance, school completion and post-school engagement in employment, training or further education.

The scholarship funds need to be spent on education related expenses and there are reporting arrangements which support this. As part of the agreement parents provide their child's school report to The Smith Family so that school attendance and engagement can be monitored and supported.

Learning for Life is also underpinned by **community engagement**. Key to efficiently and effectively delivering the program at scale across Australia, are The Smith Family's extensive cross-sectoral partnerships. These include partnerships with over 500 schools, 137 corporates, 73 Trusts and Foundations, 25 universities and numerous non-government organisations. These partnerships are complemented by close to 8,000 volunteers who support our work.

Learning for Life program outcomes

The Smith Family has a strong focus on research and evaluation, in particular for its *Learning for Life* program, given that students' long term participation in the program offers a significant opportunity to both track educational outcomes and better understand what is and isn't effective in this area. The three measures of effectiveness for the program are:

- Improve school attendance over time to 90%
- Increase the proportion of students who advance to Year 12
- Increase the proportion of students engaged in employment and further education after they leave the program.

Attendance

Table 1 identifies the average school attendance rates for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students on the *Learning for Life* program across the 2013 and 2014 school years.

Table 1: *Learning for Life* students' school attendance rates

Average attendance rate	2013		2014	
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	All students	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	All students
Years 1 to 6	89.6%	91.2%	89.4%	91.3%
Years 7 to 10	82.7%	86.0%	83.7%	86.8%
Total	86.9%	89.0%	87.3%	89.5%

There is no 'average' national attendance measure for Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal students, as data are available by jurisdiction. However, in 2013, average Year 9 attendance rates for Aboriginal students in government schools in NSW, Queensland and Western Australia were 79%, 78% and 64% respectively.¹⁴

¹⁴ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, (2015) *Report on Government Services 2015*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

Advancement to Year 12

The Smith Family's Advancement Rate measures the proportion of Year 10 *Learning for Life* students who advance to Year 12 while still on scholarship. It measures individual student's progress through school and so is therefore more accurate than 'apparent' school retention measures. 53.3% of Aboriginal *Learning for Life* students who were in Year 10 in 2012 advanced to Year 12 in 2014. This is up from 51.9% in 2011 to 2013.

Post school engagement in work, study or training

The Smith Family's Engagement Rate measures the engagement in work, study and/or training of *Learning for Life* students who left the program in Years 10, 11 or 12, a year after they left the scholarship. In 2015, 74.2% of Aboriginal former *Learning for Life* students were engaged in work, study and/or training, 12 months after leaving the program. Of those not yet in work, study and/or training, 80% were actively looking for work and one in six was volunteering. The 2015 Engagement Rate for Aboriginal students was up from 70.0% in 2013.

Analysis of our Engagement Rate data suggests that young people who leave school in Year 11 may be particularly vulnerable to poor post-school outcomes, relative to those who leave at the end of Year 12 or Year 10. As a group, *Learning for Life* students who leave school at the end of Year 10 appear to be more 'purposeful' about their decision, and more likely to move into apprenticeships, traineeships, employment and/or study, than those who leave in Year 11. This analysis has resulted in an additional focus by The Smith Family on supporting young people in Year 11, including to help them stay at school, identify career pathways and support them to make positive post-school transitions.

Year-on-year improvements

Of particular importance perhaps to the Inquiry, is that there has been, with one small exception, year-on-year improvements for Aboriginal students on the *Learning for Life* program, across school attendance, completion and post-school engagement. This suggests that targeted efforts to improve these outcomes for students have been making a difference, even though further improvements are still possible, particularly with respect to Year 12 completion.

Strategies that have been introduced to support improved educational outcomes include: sophisticated analysis and use of data with staff across the organisation to identify families or groups of families whose children may be struggling educationally; providing family partnerships training for *Learning for Life* staff so they are better able to support families; revising practice guidelines to ensure more informed and high quality support; and increasing role specialisation of staff to enable more effective support, including with families and schools.

***Learning for Life* summary**

In summary, *Learning for Life* is:

- **Highly targeted**
- Based on the **principles of reciprocity, accountability and parental engagement**
- **Effective** at improving educational and employment outcomes for highly disadvantaged young Australians.
- A **cost-effective partnership** which involves community, schools, educational institutions, business and philanthropic resources, including 8,000 volunteers and in-kind resources.
- Already **scaled** and easily **expanded**.

2. *Girls at the Centre* program

The Smith Family has been running the *Girls at the Centre* program at Centralian Middle School in Alice Springs from 2008 to the end of 2015. It was developed and informed by research showing that increasing the educational outcomes achieved by young women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, is particularly important, not only to them, but their families and communities. This is because women are often instrumental in bringing about social change in disadvantaged communities.

The program was developed at the request of the Alice Springs community and was an acknowledgement of the more limited national focus on the educational outcomes of girls, relative to boys. It was also in response to the fact that many programs used sport as a 'hook' for engagement, yet sport is not appealing to all students, including many girls.

The program supports girls in the 'middle years' of school (Years 7 to 9) to stay engaged in education and learning. It reflects many of the features known to be effective in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls. It provides intensive and holistic supported aimed at strengthening social, emotional and academic skills. A central component of the program is the strong focus on providing girls with a range of mentoring opportunities – from coaches, who are available to the participants and their families on a daily basis, to community mentors from a range of education and career fields.

Girls at the Centre was independently evaluated by Associate Professors Tess Lea and Catherine Driscoll from the University of Sydney in 2012. The evaluation concluded that the program:

- Positively impacts on life goals and skills
- Impacts on community engagement with the school, particularly through families
- Is highly valued by school staff, participants and their families

- Significantly improves school attendance (Lea & Driscoll 2012:55).¹⁵

Across the life of the program, the school attendance rates of girls who participated in *Girls at the Centre* significantly exceeded that of their school peers. The evaluation also provided evidence of participants' increased self esteem, confidence, connection to school, as well as the development and pursuit of life goals and aspirations, including completing school and pursuing further education and training.

The evaluation identified a range of critical factors which contributed to the program's success. These included the:

- Skill level and effectiveness of the women employed as 'Girl Coaches'
- Significant parent engagement – described by the evaluation as 'an extraordinary achievement'
- Inclusive mix of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls and other girls
- Input into decision making of the girls involved in the program
- Holistic approach to offering support across all aspects of the girls' lives
- Resources and facilities available to the program, including a dedicated 'Girls Room' in the school
- Independence from school and government, including discrete funding and management by The Smith Family
- Integration with the school's approach to outreach and family engagement
- Formal partnerships, strategic alliances, networks and coalitions that include businesses and the community (Lea & Driscoll 2012).

Given the need for such a program and the clear effectiveness of *Girls at the Centre*, The Smith Family is keen to expand it to other communities, such as Wagga Wagga, Bairnsdale and Dubbo. Further information on *Girls at the Centre* is available at www.thesmithfamily.com.au

3. Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (IYLP)

The Indigenous Youth Leadership Program is a Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet funded initiative that gives young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the opportunity to complete their secondary education in a high performing academic school (day and boarding). The Smith Family is a facilitator of this program and works with students and 15 partner schools across South Australia, NSW, Victoria and the Northern Territory to achieve educational outcomes.

Students are brought onto the program from Years 7 to 11 and supported to complete Year 12. Many are from regional and remote communities. The Smith Family's role is to make sure that any hurdles that are encountered – by the student or school – are managed successfully, so the student is able to complete

¹⁵ T. Lea and C. Driscoll (2012) *Evaluation of The Smith Family's 'Girls at the Centre' program, Centralian Middle Schools, Alice Springs*, The University of Sydney: Sydney.

D.THE SMITH FAMILY'S PROGRAMS



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Year 12. For many students it will be the first time they have been living away from home and they will be starting at a new school, which can be challenging.

The Smith Family works with the student and their family throughout the application process to support them to select the school 'best fitted' to the student. They also work with each student to develop and implement a leadership plan and provide a strong network of support for the student.

One of the strengths of the program is that the schools are able to provide increased subject choices, and more networking and leadership opportunities and career mentors, than are generally available in the students' home communities.

In 2015, The Smith Family supported 176 students through IYLP, and this will increase to 279 in 2016. In 2015, 41 of the students supported by The Smith Family through IYLP, graduated from Year 12. As at November 2015, 20 of them were moving into work, 19 had applied for university or TAFE and two were having a gap year before returning to study in 2017.

A video of Freeda, an IYLP participant who recently completed Year 12 and is now enrolled at university is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbogN4ocSPU>

E.CONCLUSION

There has been considerable investment by numerous organisations and sectors over many years, in a range of initiatives and programs aimed at improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. To date however, despite much goodwill, effort and investment, progress has not been as strong as would be hoped or anticipated.

Contributing to this has, in part, been a generally too limited focus on evaluation and assessing the outcomes achieved by various initiatives, including longitudinally. There has also been limited longer-term investment in those initiatives which have been shown to be effective or have shown some promise. There have been many pilot programs, a too limited appreciation of the diverse circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and a limited capacity to efficiently scale effective programs.

Research, such as that discussed in this submission, offers guidance on the best opportunities and pathways that can be provided to Indigenous students to assist them to succeed in school. This is complemented by the practice experience of The Smith Family implementing evaluated and outcomes focussed programs, in diverse regional and metropolitan communities across Australia.

Some of the themes identified from research and practice include:

- **Long-term**, targeted and **holistic** support for young people.
- A culture of **high aspirations** and expectations and a **strengths** based approach.
- **Parental, family and community engagement**, including cross-sectoral partnerships. This includes seeking the involvement of, and working with, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, respected and recognised leaders, parents, teachers and community leaders. It also includes acknowledging that educators/schools alone cannot be held responsible for improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.
- **Flexible** and **nuanced** support that takes into account individual, school and community needs, resources and dynamics.
- Use of **data, research and evaluation** to inform program design, development and continuous improvement. This includes longitudinal evaluation, identifying what works and what doesn't work and using this to build the body of evidence regarding how to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Australia can and must do better in providing educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and support them to reach their full potential right across the education spectrum. This Inquiry has an important role to play in identifying those strategies and models which have been most successful and thereby inform ongoing public policy and program development in this critical area.

Table 2: The communities in which The Smith Family works

Total number of communities: 94			
ACT: 3	NT: 7	SA: 10	VIC: 13
Belconnen	Alice Springs	Christie Downs	Bairnsdale and Lakes Entrance
Gungahlin	Borrooloola	Elizabeth Downs	Ballarat
Tuggeranong	Darwin	Elizabeth Vale	Bendigo
	Katherine	Hackham	Brimbank
NSW: 33	Palmerston	Morphett Vale	Broadmeadows
Alexandria	Ramingining	Port Adelaide Enfield	Churchill
Ashmont	Tiwi Islands	Port Augusta	Collingwood
Auburn		Salisbury North	Dandenong
Blue Haven	QLD: 18	Smithfield Plains	Epping
Buninyong	Brighton	Whyalla	Geelong
Chester Hill	Brisbane		Morwell
Claymore	Caboolture	TAS: 4	Shepparton
Coffs Harbour	Cairns	Bridgewater / Gagebrook	Werribee
Cranebrook	Cape York	Burnie/Wynyard	
Dapto	Coolangatta	Chigwell / Claremont	WA: 6
Dubbo	Coomera	North Eastern Launceston	Collie
Fairfield	Inala		Gosnells
Goulburn	Ipswich		Kwinana
Jesmond	Logan		Midland
Lithgow	Mackay and Sarina		Mirrabooka
Macquarie Fields	Maroochydore		Pilbara
Miller	Redlands		
Mount Druitt	Rockhampton		
Nowra	Southport		
Orange	Toowoomba		
Raymond Terrace and Karuah	Torres Strait		
Seven Hills	Townsville		
Shellharbour			
Southern Wollongong			
Springfield			
Tamworth			
Taree			
Tarrawanna			
Tolland			
Tuggerah Lakes			
Wiley Park			
Windale			
Wyong			

The Smith Family's Advisory Group on issues concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

The Advisory Group on issues concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians has been established as part of The Smith Family's governance arrangements and marks an important milestone in the Reconciliation journey of The Smith Family.

The Advisory Group was formed to ensure The Smith Family's policies, programs and program management tools are effective, holistic and culturally responsive, and able to support a growing younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

Key deliverables

The key deliverables of the Advisory Group include to:

- Provide guidance and recommendations for implementation of The Smith Family's 2013-2016 Reconciliation Action Plan actions and annual reporting and any reviews conducted.
- Provide advice and guidance about The Smith Family's approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities to maximise potential outcomes.
- Advise on the extent to which The Smith Family should balance our work between remote, regional and urban settings.
- Advise on issues that arise in the Australian community that have the potential to impact on The Smith Family or that challenge our approaches.

Membership and frequency of meetings

The Advisory Group comprises at least five members including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders from diverse backgrounds with demonstrated capacity to advise The Smith Family on achieving our "Vision for Reconciliation", and may include appropriately skilled non-indigenous members.

Members are invited to join the Advisory Group by the CEO and serve nominal terms initially of three years. New appointments take account of the recommendations of the Advisory Group itself.

The Smith Family recognises that suitable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders are in high demand. The Smith Family takes this into consideration in choosing Advisory Group members. One strategy is to seek out emerging leaders offering them business networking and development opportunities in corporate governance as part of their three year commitment to participation. The Group has a young Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander leader who represents each State and Territory to reflect the national scope of our business operations.

The Advisory Group integrates governance and leadership opportunities as it supports individual developmental capacity building and culturally responsive governance arrangements.

The current external membership of the Advisory Group includes: Leah Armstrong (Chair), April Long, John Rawnsley, Lidia Thorpe and Emily Jane Knights. The Smith Family representatives on the Advisory Group are: a Board member, Chief Executive Officer, Head of Policy and Programs, Head of State and Territory Operations, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy Manager and the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program Coordinator.

The group meets three to four times a year with a pre-brief scheduled before every meeting.