

**MCEECDYA Indigenous  
Education Action Plan Draft  
2010 - 2014**

*A Submission from*

**The Smith Family**

*to*

**MCEECDYA**

*February 2010*

The Smith Family is grateful for the opportunity to comment on this plan and commends the Ministerial Council for this progress in collaborating to improve outcomes for Indigenous students. We also welcome the recognition in the document of the not for profit sector as a useful partner.

This submission is designed to provide MCEECDYA with an overview of the key learnings that The Smith Family has accrued over the last decade in supporting the education and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians that may inform further refinement of the Draft Action Plan. In particular, The Smith Family emphasizes the following:

- That the Draft Plan should be aligned and linked into plans being pursued in other Ministerial Councils to improve Indigenous health, address Indigenous homelessness - including overcrowding - and break down the barriers to Indigenous people fully participating in the workforce. The Smith Family's experience shows us that these linkages need to be made at every level, and supported by high level communication and agreement between jurisdictions, within jurisdictions and between departments.
- That there needs to be a framework of accountability at the community level to ensure that these linkages are translated into action on the ground. In practical terms this may mean that a protocol is established to ensure every child who is enrolled at school has automatic access to basic health services at the school site unless the parents actively "opt out" of that service. It may mean that teacher development and recruitment programs to develop a remote workforce guarantees a job and a house and leave to all teachers even those recruited locally. It may also mean that while encouraging students to stay at school and make positive post school pathways provision is made to help their parents and carers simultaneously acquire skills and employment.

Without these linkages all our efforts, even those of The Smith Family outlined below, are much less likely to deliver sustainable improvements in the lives of Indigenous Australians.

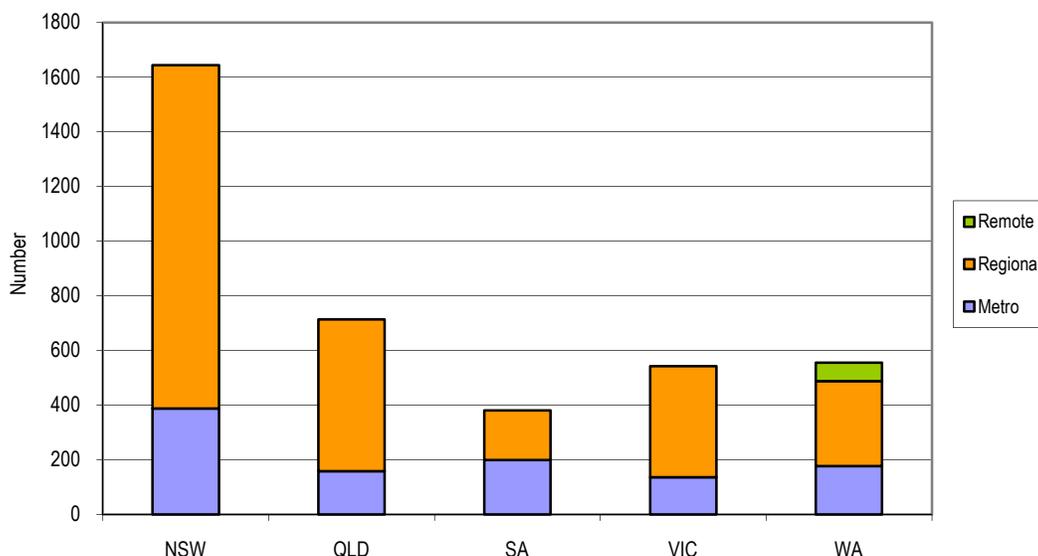
The Smith Family is currently working across Australia in 95 communities and as such, has developed considerable grass roots experience. As a way of providing input on the MCEECDYA Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-2014, we are pleased to include in this submission some of the key learnings from our work with Indigenous students and their families across Australia.

## The Smith Family's work with Indigenous children, students and families

The Smith Family, primarily supported by the generosity of the Australian public as well as corporate and philanthropic donations and Government contributions, is assisting thousands of Indigenous children and young people to reach their potential through education.

As the entrée into our suite of evidence-based literacy programs known as *Learning for Life*, The Smith Family is currently providing financial scholarships to 3,836 Indigenous children (as at January 2010) representing approximately 14% of our total scholarship cohort. These scholarships are provided in metropolitan and regional settings across most of mainland Australia (see Graph 1 below), as well as in two remote sites in the Pilbara. Scholarships are currently being introduced in the Northern Territory into the remote sites of Alice Springs and Katherine through THE SMITH FAMILY girls' programs and are not yet reflected in this data.

**Graph 1: The geographical location of Indigenous students on Learning for Life scholarships**

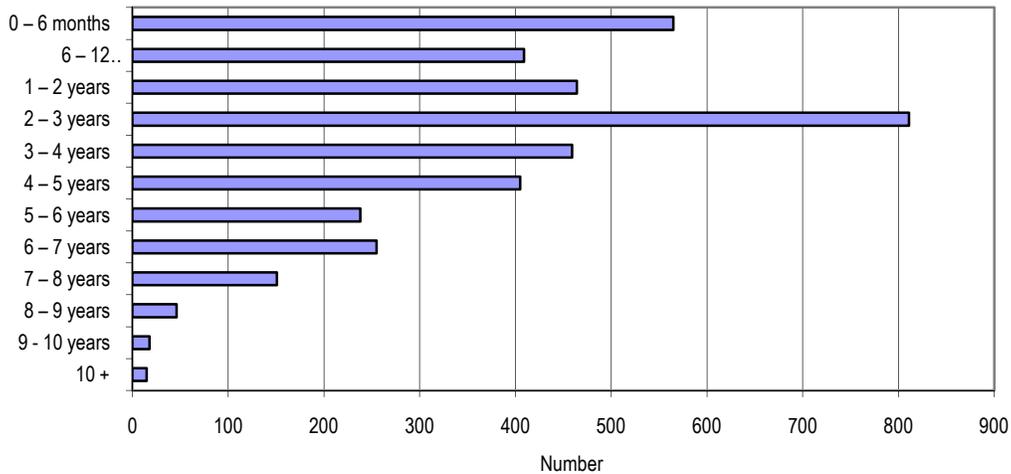


The length of time students stay on the scholarship is an indicator of their retention and participation at school. Graph 2 (below) shows that The Smith Family has recruited and maintained 2,249 Indigenous students for at least two years, representing more than half of those currently receiving the *Learning for Life* scholarship. This retention demonstrates that these scholarships are being valued by the families as they are continuing to comply with the scholarship requirements.

This increased retention of Indigenous students facilitates improvements in the awareness of our staff regarding the changing needs of these individuals over time, and underscores the importance of collecting and recording data from this group to inform program development. The challenge now is to

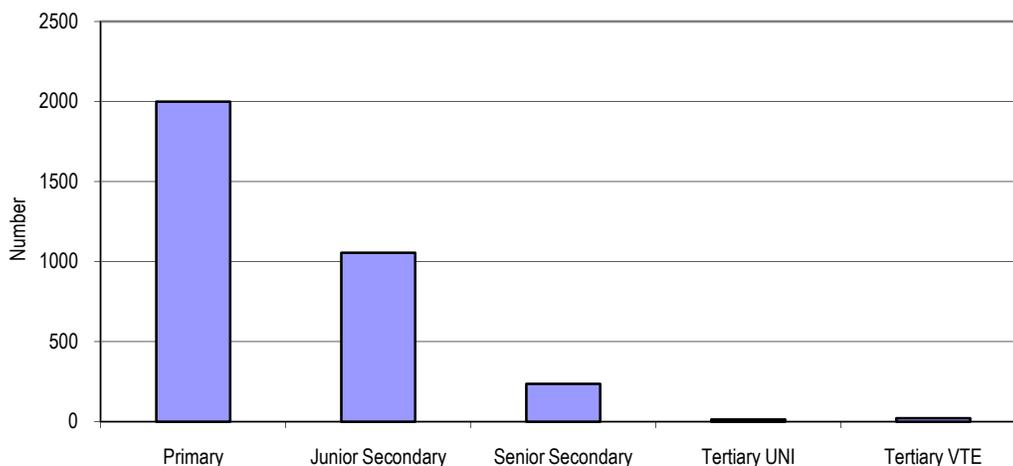
retain this large cohort of Indigenous students across the life course into post school pathways using the evidence already gathered and discussed below in the section ‘Lessons Learnt’.

**Graph 2: Retention of Indigenous students on Learning for Life scholarships**



Graph 3 below shows that almost all Indigenous *Learning for Life* students are in the compulsory years of schooling with most in primary school. This profile is positive in that it is consistent with research indicating the importance of focusing effort on supporting students in the early years of school. It is important to recognise that some of those receiving a scholarship in the secondary and tertiary years will also be parents themselves, given that Indigenous young people are five times more likely to be teenaged parents than non-Indigenous Australians. This enables us to provide two levels of support, focusing on supporting their academic progress as students as well as their abilities as parents.

**Graph 3: Schooling levels of Indigenous students on Learning for Life scholarships**



In addition to these scholarships, The Smith Family has developed a range of programs that across Australia provide support to significantly more Indigenous children, students and families. These include:

- early childhood programs;
- programs built around sport and music;
- Breakfast with a Mentor;
- Girls at the Centre (integrating a range of emotional literacy and comprehension literacy initiatives);
- Post-school pathways mentoring;
- Transition to high school programs delivered through our “School at the Centre” delivery model in the Northern Territory;<sup>1</sup>
- Comprehension and digital literacy programs in Queensland communities such as Palm Island and Cherbourg;
- Indigenous Secondary student retention program in Bairnsdale, Victoria;
- Our Communities for Children sites in Townsville (Queensland) and covering the 380,000 square kilometres of the Katherine region in the Northern Territory
- The 82 Indigenous Youth leadership Scholarships supporting students to attend private high performing boarding schools.

These programs have been designed and developed in accordance with the evidence around best practice that we have developed through several years involvement in the Swan Nyungar Sports Education Project (SNSEP) in Western Australia (see Lessons Learnt section below for details).

## Lessons Learnt

<sup>1</sup> Our ‘School at the Centre’ model now operates in 14 school communities across Darwin, Palmerston, Tiwi Islands, Katherine, Borroloola and Alice Springs.

Having established our presence in Western Australia in 2001, we entered a partnership with the Maguire Brothers, Balga Senior High School, Simpson Norris International and the WA Department of Education to develop our first Indigenous community demonstration project, the Swan Nyungar Sports Education Project (SNSEP).

SNSEP is primarily a supplementary program that enhances the capacity of schools to meet the special learning needs of Indigenous secondary students. The aim is to use the evident strengths and commitment of Indigenous students in relation to sport to increase their educational participation and retention, complete their secondary schooling to Year 12 and achieve a WA Certificate of Education score that will enable them to apply for tertiary education at university or vocational education courses at TAFE. The design of the program reflected the early learnings arising from consultation with the Swan Indigenous community, but has since provided numerous additional insights into best practice over the years it has run as a demonstration project.

The fifteen “lessons learnt” from the SNSEP program (reported in the *SNSEP Operations Guide* published by The Smith Family in April 2009) have been used to inform The Smith Family’s work with Indigenous children, students and families nationwide. Of course the application of these lessons is not a linear, top-down process. It is best likened to the process of completing a jigsaw puzzle. As opportunities arise, with interest and capacity in the community and a willingness from our sponsors and donors to provide support, we have been able to progressively apply our learnings and develop models that are evidenced based and effectively meet the needs of Indigenous children, students and families in a range of settings and community contexts.

The lessons learnt from SNSEP are grouped around six themes below, with examples of how they have been applied in The Smith Family’s practice.

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#### LESSONS FROM SNSEP

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***The importance of maintaining strong and consistent program leadership across the school***

***The need to articulate and communicate program aims to teachers, school administration, students, families and external stakeholders***

## *THEME 1 - Governance and leadership*

After establishing a presence in NT in 2006, we focused on forming relationships with schools, involving the school councils as the primary consultation and governance groups for our work. This has ensured commitment from each school to our work and enabled us to be responsive to the changing needs of the school environment. This kind of partnership, that THE SMITH FAMILY has called “School at the Centre”, was recognised in 2009 when our partnership with Karama Primary School in Darwin won the \$100,000 NAB Schools First Award for the Northern Territory.

Over the four years of our work in the NT, The Smith Family staff and our grass roots relationships with teachers and families through the “School at the Centre” model, have been one of the constant and stable factors in a tumultuous environment. For example there have been four education Ministers, three Departmental Chief Executives and all but two of our schools have had at least two Principals. Some have had three or four.

The Smith Family has also been able to leverage the strong relationships we have with the NT Education bureaucracy and our corporate support to attract and/or retain Principals with strong leadership capability to our schools and to attract resources for our schools from other programs, such as the Commonwealth’s Sporting Chance program.

## ***THEME 2: Making the school a welcoming place for Indigenous parents, teachers and community members***

The Smith Family has been credited with bringing parents into the school environment in an unprecedented way.

For example:

- The school principal in Alice Springs has said that the Girls at the Centre Program has brought Indigenous parents into the school for the first time in her experience. These same parents are now requesting a room at the school so that they can have a base to more deeply engage.
- At McFarlane Primary the Breakfast with a Mentor program has brought parents previously unwelcome at the school because of antisocial behaviour, into the school to connect with teachers and even find a role at the school as volunteers.
- At Borroloola events such as THE SMITH FAMILYS “Celebrate school” and “Big Breakfast” has attracted parents, elders and community members such as the ranger services into the school in an unprecedented way.
- THE SMITH FAMILY’s Early Learning Centre at Ramingining has employed a number of part time Indigenous coordinators to work in the school environment. These coordinators have been mentored by early learning Tata Centre Darwin based staff.

### LESSONS FROM SNSEP

***The need for inclusion of parental and Indigenous communities in the program***

***Recognising the importance of ongoing engagement with the families of students whose attendance is poor***

***The inclusion of and the appropriate training and support for Indigenous staff employed in the program***

## ***THEME 3: Providing “wrap around” support***

Indigenous children and students are much more likely than non Indigenous to come from larger families and from families of intergenerational unemployment. Their families are less likely to be buying their own home and more likely to live in crowded accommodation. Their families, even those living in cities are less likely to be upwardly mobile over generations and to remain on city fringes in lower socioeconomic areas. The opportunities for these students to understand and benefit from key community institutions such as banks, universities and the fullest range of health services are few. These children and students are also negatively impacted by the racism of the broader community who may have had little personal interaction or understanding of Indigenous people and are influenced by media stereotypes and isolated experiences of public antisocial behaviour.

The Smith Family recognises that to break this cycle, the support and advice that many families would otherwise provide for their children themselves, might also need to come from others. Inviting community members to play this role has a double sided impact. It helps the children themselves and positively changes the attitudes of the community.

For example:

- Breakfast with a Mentor in Alice Springs, Borroloola and Katherine provides more than 200 students each term with an ideal start to their day both physically and socially. It not only feeds children, it gives them an opportunity, through discussion with an adult or an older peer to prepare mentally and emotionally for the school day. For older children it is a forum to provide networks in the community through links to the mentors and stimulates their aspirations. For the mentors it gives them -some for the first time - a chance to meet and listen to young Indigenous people, an interaction which can change their attitudes. For example an older non Indigenous Rotarian attended the Katherine program as a mentor. Having listened to a six year old “pour his heart out” about the incidents of the previous evening she said, “Now I understand why I’m here”.
- In Darwin, a wide range of businesses provide work experience for students from remote Ramingining. Getting to know these students contributes to breaking down the stereotypes of Indigenous people.

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#### LESSONS FROM SNSEP

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***The need to provide student transport to and from the program in recognition of the fact that most students do not live close to the school and many families do not have reliable private transport***

***The importance of explicitly teaching life and personal development skills, as well as other school curriculum***

***The value of engagement with the broader community to create community cohesion and mutual respect***

- At Ruyton Girls school in Melbourne parents provide home stay and the school provides classroom and other opportunities for girls from Alice Springs. Feedback from the Ruyton families demonstrates the profound impact of the experience on interests and attitudes. For the girls themselves, the experience and relationships being developed (the Ruyton school has had a return visit to Alice Springs and will again offer this opportunity in 2010) are a valuable network for the future.
- The Smith Family recognises that many families are unable to adequately access health care for their children. Chronic illness is a barrier to learning. The Smith Family has proposed to the NT Government that they develop the integration of health and education services in schools. To ensure the most disadvantaged students benefit, we have proposed an 'opt-out' process so that when families enrol students in school they automatically give permission for children to receive basic medical assistance.

## ***THEME 4: High expectations***

The Smith Family has resisted lowering standards for Indigenous students. Rather we are working to identify the students, families and school communities who are willing to bring the asset of their own effort to make the most of the opportunity we can offer.

For example:

- All of the almost 4000 Indigenous students receiving *Learning for Life* scholarships have been recruited and retained under the same requirements as other students.
- Students recruited to Girls at the Centre make a commitment along with their parents to attend and participate and their academic and behavioural progress is regularly monitored.
- Students involved in the percussion bands at Gray Primary and Karama Primary have to comply with behaviour and attendance requirements.
- Students participating in Post School Pathways mentoring from Ramingining, with home stay and work experience in Darwin, can only participate if school attendance and behaviour meet acceptable standards.
- All of our new 82 Indigenous Youth Leadership Program scholarship holders have been carefully selected by a panel including a local Indigenous leader and will need to show acceptable academic progress and full participation to continue receiving the scholarship.

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### LESSONS FROM SNSEP

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***The rigorous and consistent application of student selection criteria in the process of recruiting students to SNSEP***

## ***THEME 5: A focus on school achievement***

Examples of how The Smith Family is maintaining a focus on school achievement, not just attendance, are:

- The design of the Girls at the Centre program, which is integrated into the mainstream school day with progress in numeracy and literacy regularly monitored.
- The Smith Family has provided intensive support in Cherbourg to assist the development of a set of Indigenous themed reading materials.
- Working with the Centre for Community Child Health we have explored the application of the *Let's Read* program in Indigenous communities. Indigenous children in many parts of Queensland including most recently in Cape York are now benefiting from this program.
- The Smith Family has actively engaged with the Northern Territory Government, through discussions and submission to Reviews of the Intervention and planning for Territory 2030, to promote staff development in literacy and community based teacher training to encourage remote Indigenous people to take up teaching roles. The "Grow your own" teacher development program being piloted by Charles Darwin University in remote Catholic schools is now planned to be broadened to other communities.

### LESSONS FROM SNSEP

***The need for curriculum strategies that are culturally appropriate, rigorous, clearly articulated within the broader curriculum framework, and cater to the full range of student abilities e.g. use of matched ability groups in the classroom in recognition of the fact that the literacy levels of students vary greatly across years***

***The value of Individual Education Programs (IEPs) which tailor learning to individual needs of all students in the program***

***The value of recruiting skilled staff with an ability to deal with a broad range of educational disadvantage***

***The value of incorporating mainstream components into the SNSEP curriculum from the very first year of the program in order to equip students to interact with mainstream society and avoid perceptions that SNSEP is a closed enclave within the school***

***Recognition of the need to dedicate two hours every day to literacy because most SNSEP students have low reading, spelling and writing ability***

## ***THEME 6: The importance of Indigenous girls' education***

Girls comprise 49.5% of The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* Indigenous students. In addition The Smith Family is supporting 50 girls in Alice Springs on the Girls at the Centre Program and is providing assistance to programs focused on girls at Katherine High School and Casuarina Senior College.

- The Smith Family, through discussions with Government at Commonwealth and Territory level has raised the awareness of the importance of Indigenous girls. In 2010, The Sporting Chance Indigenous Girls Program will operate at Centralian Middle and Senior school in Alice Springs, in Palmerston Middle and Senior school and at Jabiru.

The introduction of *Learning for Life* Scholarships, a focus of our work in NT in 2010, will provide scholarships to Indigenous girls in Alice Springs, Katherine and Darwin and Palmerston. This is the priority area for this support of the NT Government and greatly welcomed, in anticipation by school communities.

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### LESSONS FROM SNSEP

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***The inclusion of girls into SNSEP program from 2003 onwards in recognition of the fact that both genders require additional educational opportunities and need to be supported to achieve their potential***

## Conclusion and Recommendations:

This submission has provided a summary of the key learnings drawn from The Smith Family's work in supporting the education and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians over the last decade. We believe in the potential for the Education Action Plan to provide strong progress in closing the gap for these communities, and make the following recommendations in the spirit of working collaboratively around these shared objectives:

### *The Smith Family recommends:*

- High level communication regarding implementation, not only between jurisdictions but also within jurisdictions and departments to achieve the closing the gap targets in regards to this Draft Plan and other relevant plans.
- A local level framework of accountability that ensures that all of the linkages evident within this Draft Plan are put into daily practical effect.
- An enlarged scope of services deemed to be 'compulsory' within schools, e.g. including basic health services.
- Development of teacher recruitment programs that account for the challenges of attracting people to remote areas. Ensure, however, that local teachers are not excluded from these schemes.
- Clear communication within focus schools to all stakeholders including teachers, school administration, students, families and external stakeholders and an emphasis on strong governance and leadership over school level actions.
- Strategies that assist parents and carers to simultaneously acquire the appropriate skills required to participate socially and economically in their communities.