

Address by Dr Lisa O'Brien, CEO of The Smith Family, to the Mitchell Institute Policy Forum, on Wednesday 27th November 2013, in Melbourne.

Introduction

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the people of the Kulin nation who are the Traditional Custodians of this Land on which we're meeting today and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

The Smith Family is a national charity with more than 90 years history in Australia helping disadvantaged individuals and their families. However, over the past two decades we have transformed ourselves. Moving away from providing emergency assistance to now focussing exclusively on helping children and young people get the education they deserve.

Central to that effort is our *Learning for Life* initiative.

Learning for Life offers financial support to cover the often prohibitive learning expenses that accompany attending even a public school – uniforms, shoes, sporting equipment, the ability to attend excursions – while offering the individual support of a frontline worker and access to a range of learning and mentoring programs.

The need for our work in Australia is as great as it's ever been.

As many of you know, large gaps in achievement remain between young Australians from low and high socio-economic backgrounds across all levels of testing, Year 12 completion and post-school engagement in work or study.

Our results

A foundation belief for The Smith Family is that every child deserves a chance to realise their potential, no matter their background.

With *Learning for Life* at our core, The Smith Family currently has a presence in 96 communities across Australia and last year supported more than 112,000 children and their parents/carers.

Our work also enabled 34,000 students to be linked to a sponsor who not only provides financial support for their education, but through writing and offering encouragement, strong motivation to study and improve.

Example of our results:

The average school attendance rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders enrolled in *Learning for Life* is 86.5% – which is above the national rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people generally.

Set ambitious goals for the Australian education system

Having given you a bit of background on The Smith Family let me make a few comments across a number of areas to help stimulate our dialogue.

TSF supports the goals of the Melbourne Declaration, that we want young Australians to be successful learners, confident and creative, active and informed.

It is fundamental that we as a nation set ourselves the collective goal of an educational system which is high performing by international standards.

However, equally important in the Declaration were the goals of equity and excellence for Australian schooling – and here we clearly have some challenges.

For some Australia's education system is working quite well. Taken as a national average our children at 15 are scoring relatively well on maths, literacy and science compared to their counterparts all over the world.

But that success masks a huge level of variability: a small group of schools at the top producing impressive results and a large group in the middle who are doing okay covering the extremely poor outcomes for schools in mostly disadvantaged areas around the country.

In order for us to achieve the Melbourne Declaration's goals we must first focus on closing the gap in educational performance between children from low and high socio-economic backgrounds.

How we do that?

I very much agree with Dr Tom Stehlik from the University of South Australia that our schools haven't caught up with the 21st Century.

That on the whole we approach the education of our children and young people – to quote Mr Stehlik – *“as a homogenous group of adolescents without agency or voice, studying full-time, living at home with supportive parents, not working and with no responsibilities other than being a student.”*

That picture does not bear much resemblance to the thousands of young people The Smith Family supports.

Invest in early stages of learning and transition points

It's no surprise that The Smith Family is a strong supporter of Nobel prize-winning economist, James Heckman's view regarding the importance of investing in the early years.

But as many of us know this is not the end of Heckman's message.

More particularly he says to keep on investing, in a balanced way, and particularly through transition points – the move into primary school, to secondary school, to post-school learning or employment – to achieve increased rates of school completion and university enrolment and a reduction in welfare dependence.

The increased shift in all jurisdictions to ‘needs-based’ school funding is the key starting point for turning around our country’s less than impressive educational performance.

But getting vulnerable young Australians off to the right start isn’t just about arriving at a fairer education funding model – as important as that is.

It’s **how** we spend our educational resources that will ultimately make the difference.

Education funding has increased over the past two decades with demonstrably limited return in terms of improved literacy and numeracy.

Our systems and constitutional arrangements have struggled to provide the continuum of support that is required by vulnerable children, young people and their families.

This clearly has to change.

Create new models for schooling

Whether by increased autonomy or full-blown independence, Australia’s public schools are likely to experience dramatic changes in terms of their responsibilities in the years ahead.

The Smith Family supports balanced measures to improve the autonomy of local schools.

Each school faces different challenges. Schools know what’s best for their students and should be given flexibility to meet those needs within a broader framework.

But some schools – particularly schools in disadvantaged areas – are less able to take advantage of the benefits of a move to greater autonomy.

We must avoid a system that leaves schools – any school, but particularly those with the least capacity – to fend for themselves.

Schools in disadvantaged areas tend to:

- Have more limited human and community resources, so are vulnerable to devolved governance arrangements.

- Have difficulties attracting quality Principals and staff, so are vulnerable when autonomy/independence place more demands, including specialised expertise.

Have fewer local services and opportunities available for children, their families and schools to draw on.

The Smith Family supports an approach that empowers Principals and school communities to address their challenges but with the resources they need.

We've devised a model for successful school-community partnerships that, we believe, offers a way of supporting schools as they tread down the path to greater autonomy.

Under The Smith Family Hub model, we act as a broker across a number of schools and other local stakeholders – business, government, and community agencies – to more efficiently direct resources to support the retention and achievement of children in education.

The starting point towards improving the educational achievement and retention of individual students has to be about harnessing the strengths and assets of the entire school community and co-ordinating them in a way which is focused on sharing goals and outcomes.

With support from the federal and state governments, philanthropists, universities and businesses, we have already established five Smith Family Hubs around the country – in Wyndham, Morwell and Lakes Entrance in Victoria, in the Swan area of Western Australia and most recently in Launceston in Tasmania.

Early outcomes suggest they are a very effective model for supporting disadvantaged students and their families.

But they're not a short-term fix – nothing is when we're dealing with big gaps in educational achievement.

Therefore we need to fund these initiatives – not for one or two years – but more likely for five or 10 years.

Doing so demands both new governance and more flexible and cross-sectoral funding arrangements.

Learn systematically from success/Measure the impact

Now, across Australia there are hundreds of individual programs and pilots aimed at addressing educational disadvantage – all well-intentioned – but which ones actually work?

We need to 'pick some winners'. Choose programs that have evidence behind them and find ways to scale them up nationally.

Implementing programs at scale is a key challenge but unless we master it, effective programs will remain too costly and ineffective programs will continue to drain our resources.

For example, *Girls at the Centre* is a Smith Family program we run in Alice Springs which has been evaluated independently (University of Sydney) and found to have a positive impact on school retention and attendance, the girls' life goals, the school-engagement of them and their families.

Participants in the program have a 10% higher average school attendance rate compared to other female students in the same school.

Clearly, *Girls at the Centre* is a model that could be used in other disadvantaged schools to improve the performance of girls and young women.

In terms of scaling up successful programs we have two challenges:

- Ensuring we have the evidence of what works to improve educational outcomes;

- Having the policies and funding frameworks to support effective and efficient implementation at scale of these programs, including across jurisdictions.

In terms of evidence, The Smith Family is investing our own resources in systematically tracking the long-term outcomes of the 34,000 low socio-economic students who are enrolled in our *Learning for Life* program.

Through our research we are getting a better picture of what the barriers are to educational achievement and what works to improve these outcomes.

For example, The Smith Family has developed a methodology for reporting on the attendance rates of the students we support across 4000 schools.

We already know that school attendance is absolutely crucial in terms of a young person's education and that there is no 'safe threshold' for absenteeism – every day of attendance counts toward your final educational outcome.

But there's currently no national standard for reporting attendance. So, in the interest of being able to assess our effectiveness, we've created our own.

Our data – over time – will help clarify the overall picture. We'll be tracking key groups of students (eg: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) and making comparisons with students not receiving *Learning for Life* scholarships.