



everyone's family

Submission on the *Northern Territory Draft Education Bill 2015*

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Graham Jaeschke
General Manager SA and NT
PO Box 10500, Rundle Mall,
SA, 5000

Telephone 08 8224 1409
Email: graham.jaeschke@thesmithfamily.com.au

Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide commentary on the Northern Territory's *Draft Education Bill 2015*, given as the Bill notes, the importance of education for individuals and the community as a whole.

The Smith Family is Australia's largest education-oriented charity and delivers programs in 94 communities across all states and territories. In 2013 we supported over 134,000 disadvantaged children, young people and their families. This included over 15,500 from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

In the Northern Territory, we work across 7 communities, including Alice Springs, Borroloola, Darwin, Katherine, Palmerston and Ramingining. In 2013 we supported more than 3,400 disadvantaged children, young people and their families in the Territory. Around 2,800 of these young people and their carers/parents were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Our programs begin in the early years and continue through to tertiary education. Our largest program, *Learning for Life*, is a long-term educational scholarship which nationally supports around 34,000 children and young people each year. The Smith Family builds deep, lasting and respectful relationships with highly disadvantaged families and we support parents/carers to be engaged in their child's learning. Over half of the secondary students on our scholarship program have been on the program for five or more years, highlighting the strength and longevity of our relationships with families.

The Smith Family is working to improve three key longer-term outcomes for the young people we support, namely: school attendance, Year 12 completion and post-school engagement in employment, education or training.

Objects and guiding principles

A broad vision of education

The objects and guiding principles of any *Education Bill* provide the opportunity to articulate to the whole community, the overarching framework which underpins education within that jurisdiction. It is also an opportunity to emphasise the importance of education for individuals, families and the community as a whole. The Smith Family welcomes the focus in the draft Bill on quality, entitlement, the recognition of the importance of parents and the focus on partnerships to achieve the best educational outcomes for children.

The Smith Family is also of the view that the objects and principles could be further enhanced by reference to the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*.

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* identifies in Article 29 that the education of children should be directed to:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* identifies the goals of equity and excellence, which The Smith Family strongly supports and sees as stronger than the references to 'quality' and 'potential' in the draft Bill.

The *Melbourne Declaration* also identifies that all young Australians be: successful learners; confident and creative individuals; and active and informed citizens. It notes that 'improving educational outcomes for all young Australians will position young people to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives.' The Declaration identifies that 'schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion'¹.

Both the United Nations Convention and the Melbourne Declaration provide a broad, holistic and inspiring perspective on the goal of education, both for individual children and young people, families and the community as a whole.

The Smith Family would also suggest that in Section 4(e), which identifies the importance of partnerships for achieving the best educational outcomes, that the role of business and philanthropy should also be included.

Publicly accessible data

The draft bill mentions in Part 2, Division 1, Clause 11 5 (g), the undertaking of research and investigation with respect to education generally. The Smith Family would stress the importance of research and evaluation if educational outcomes are to be improved for young Territorians and if government and the community are to understand the impact of funding allocations. Given the fiscal constraints facing all governments, it is important that evaluations of programs and funding

¹ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008

streams are undertaken to ensure the cost-effectiveness of initiatives. The Smith Family would urge that the draft Bill explicitly mentions evaluation in this context.

The Smith Family would also urge that the Bill mention the provision of publicly available data in this context. The availability of such data is a key platform for building public confidence and accountability in the education system. Such data should be available at the aggregate level, as well as for key sub-groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including with respect to gender.

Standard curriculum and voluntary contributions

The Smith Family welcomes the acknowledgement in Division 2, 69 of the Draft Bill, that Government school education is to be free. Given the considerable educational and financial disadvantage experienced by many young Territorians, this principle is critical. We note however that it is the 'standard curriculum program' (as defined by regulations) which is covered by this. Given the diverse range of skills, knowledge and experience required to be successful learners in the 21st century, it is important that the 'standard curriculum' is not narrowly defined.

School camps and excursions for example, are important learning opportunities for students, and are particularly so for young people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Such opportunities should be included within the definition of 'standard curriculum program'.

In the interests of developing and maintaining student and parental engagement in learning, it is also important to ensure that 'voluntary' contributions to schools are genuinely 'voluntary'. The vast majority of families who The Smith Family support are not in a position to make significant financial contributions to their child's education, despite their deep support of their children's learning.

Recent research with close to 5,000 of the families we support has identified for example, that only 12% are able to afford a range of basic educational resources (eg school uniforms, camps, excursions, new everyday school materials) 'as often as needed'. This research has also confirmed that many of the students we support do not tell their parents/carers about a range of school activities and requirements, because they are very aware of the financial challenges their family is experiencing and do not want to add to the financial pressure on their parents.

In light of this, it is essential that parents/carers are not put under any pressure – either explicitly or implicitly – to make financial contributions for their child's education in government schools.

Allocation of Government school education

The Smith Family notes that in Division 4, 77, 26 semesters in a Government school is identified as the standard allocation for students. The Smith Family welcomes the identification of a specific entitlement for young Territorians. It also notes in 78 (1) that if this allocation is exhausted, a student or a parent, may apply to the CEO for an additional allocation of up to two semesters.

Given the level of educational disadvantage experienced by many children and young people in the Northern Territory, which is apparent in the very first year of school and continues throughout school for many young people, it is highly likely that many students will need additional time to attain the educational outcomes necessary to make a positive post-school transition.

Therefore while welcoming the intent of Clause 78 (1) The Smith Family would urge that the process involved in such an application be a simple one and be proactively offered to students who may require additional time to complete school.

Parent consultative bodies – Division 3

The Smith Family strongly supports efforts to ensure parental engagement in school governance. Research shows the importance of parental engagement in their child's learning and this includes involvement in how schools operate and the culture that they develop. Different models of parental engagement will be appropriate for different school communities. Therefore we support the Bill's inclusion of parent consultative bodies and the flexibility that Division 3 provides regarding the form of that body. We note that non-government organisations can make a particular contribution regarding such bodies.

Penalties and truancy

The Smith Family notes that the draft Bill contains a significant number of offences and associated penalties, including the ability to charge and fine a child with the offence of truancy (170, 3). We appreciate the importance of publicly identifying the importance of school attendance. Strong school attendance is a prerequisite for positive educational outcomes.

The Smith Family has a very strong focus on school attendance and to working with students and their families to improve school attendance where it is an issue. The average school attendance rates for students on our *Learning for Life* program in 2014 were:

- Primary school students – 91.3%
- Secondary school students – 86.9%
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students – 87.3%.

These rates are all improvements on 2013, which were in turn improvements on 2012. Our experience over many years has shown that developing respectful long term partnerships with highly disadvantaged families, which focus on improving the educational outcomes of their children, is the key to bringing about positive change. We would suggest that this approach is much more successful over the long-term than more punitive approaches.

Apprenticeships

The Smith Family is fully supportive of Subsection (1) (page 83) not applying to employment in an approved apprenticeship that is being undertaken in conjunction with education or training provided at school.

Regulations

The Smith Family is cognisant that this legislation provides the framework for how the education system will function and that many of the day to day operational specifics for will be spelt out in regulations. The Smith Family believes that consultation on these regulations, particularly those that can significantly impact on the educational experiences of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, is very important.