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Reform of the *Education Act (NT)* Discussion Paper

Submission

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The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission on the Northern Territory Government's Discussion paper on the Reform of the *Education Act* (NT). This submission draws on our long history of supporting children, young people, families and communities in the Northern Territory and across Australia. Our comments on the Discussion Paper should be read in the context of our program delivery, research and evaluation work both in the Northern Territory and across Australia. Our comments will cover most but not all sections of the Discussion Paper.

Introduction

The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity which has provided support to children, young people and families for over 90 years. Our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need, by providing long-term support for their participation in education.

In 2012-13 our programs were delivered in 96 communities across all States and Territories and supported over 112,000 disadvantaged children, young people and their families. This includes over 11,000 from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Our work in the Northern Territory is in a diversity of communities across the Territory, namely Alice Springs, Borroloola, Darwin, Katherine, Palmerston, Ramingining, and the Tiwi Islands. In Northern Territory in the 2012-13 financial year, we supported:

- Around 300 students from a low socio-economic background, through a long-term educational *Learning for Life* scholarship.
- Around 3,500 children, young people and their parents/carers through a range of literacy and educational initiatives, and the Commonwealth Government funded *Communities for Children* program.
- Numerous cross-sectoral partnerships involving educational institutions, business, community organisations and others, through the Commonwealth Government funded *School Business Community Partnership Brokers* program.

Over 60% of the children, young people and their parents/carers we support in the Northern Territory are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

We have a strong evidence base for our programs and an integrated whole-of-organisation approach to measurement. This includes through Program Logics

and an Outcomes Framework (see Appendix A). In particular, The Smith Family is tracking three long-term outcomes of the 34,000 young people it is supporting nationally through its *Learning for Life* scholarship. These are:

- Increasing school attendance.
- Increasing the proportion of Year 10 students who advance to Year 12 or equivalent.
- Increasing the proportion of young people in post-school education, training and/or work.

Our funding

In the 2012-13 financial year, The Smith Family's income was \$75.8 million nationally, and approximately \$2.7 million in the Northern Territory. In the Northern Territory our funding includes just over \$2 million from the Commonwealth Government, approximately \$60,000 from the Territory Government with a further \$600,000 being provided by Trusts and Foundations, corporates, and individual Australians who support our work:

Our partnerships

At the core of our work is a partnership approach and we have extensive cross-sectoral partnerships within the Northern Territory and nationally. This includes with 128 corporate partners, 72 Trusts and Foundations, 20 universities and numerous schools and non-government organisations with whom we are working on a set of shared objectives focused on improving the educational and wellbeing outcomes of children and young people.

The Smith Family also draws heavily on volunteers who undertake a range of roles. In the 2012-13 financial year 7,745 volunteers contributed close to 420,000 hours of service to The Smith Family across Australia.

Section 1: Objects and guiding principles

The Smith Family strongly supports the inclusion of Objects and Guiding Principles within the *Education Act* (NT) as this provides an opportunity for a clear and shared vision on the purpose of education to be developed, owned by the community and embedded within the legislative framework which underpins education in the Territory.

The Smith Family would argue that a broad vision for the purpose of school education should be included within the Act and that The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* provide direction for the objects and guiding principles.

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* which identifies in Article 29 that signatories agree 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; and
- e. The development of respect for the natural environment.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* was signed in 2008 by the Australian Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. The Declaration identifies the goals of equity and excellence for Australian schooling and that all young Australians be: successful learners; confident and creative individuals; and active and informed citizens.

The Smith Family would also draw attention to the *Australian Education Bill 2012*, which in both its Preamble and Objects, provides some useful material to inform the reform of the *Education Act* (NT). The Bill sets out the following goals for Australian schooling, which The Smith Family would endorse:

- i. For Australian schooling to provide an excellent education for school students
- ii. For Australian schooling to be highly equitable.

Both of these goals could be easily adapted for the Northern Territory Act by replacing 'Australia' with 'Northern Territory'.

In addition, The Smith Family would suggest consideration of some of the material from the Preamble to the *Australian Education Bill 2012*, when reforming the Northern Territory Act, including:

“All students in all schools are entitled to an excellent education, allowing each student to reach his or her full potential so that he or she can succeed and contribute fully to his or her community, now and in the future.

The quality of a student's education should not be limited by where the student lives, the income of his or her family, the school he or she attends, or his or her personal circumstances.

The quality of education should not be limited by a school's location, particularly those schools in regional Australia.

Strong partnerships across the broader community are necessary to support all school students, including partnerships between teachers, parents and families, and employers.”

The United Nations Convention, the Melbourne Declaration and the *Australian Education Bill* provide a broad and holistic perspective on the goals of education, both for individual children and young people and the community as a whole. The Smith Family would urge the Northern Territory Government to draw on them when reforming its Education Act.

Section 2: Local School Autonomy

The Smith Family supports balanced measures to improve the autonomy of local schools. Each school faces different challenges and devolving decisions and resources can be positive in terms of the local community understanding local needs and taking ownership for addressing them. We therefore support schools being given flexibility to meet those needs within a broader framework of accountability.

As the Productivity Commission has noted: 'being able to pursue many of the policy directions that will support disadvantaged students requires some level of

school autonomy' (p. 276). This potentially enables schools to more appropriately target the needs of the students in their school community and inject the level of flexibility and innovation that is required to achieve this.

However, it is important to note that some schools – particularly those in disadvantaged areas and/or serving disadvantaged populations – are often less able to take advantage of the benefits of a move to greater autonomy. As The Productivity Commission has noted:

Increased autonomy could, in several respects, work against the interests of disadvantaged students. It could become more difficult for disadvantaged schools to compete for high-quality staff in school-level negotiations. Complementary strategies to steer high-quality teachers and leaders to disadvantaged schools, and appropriate resourcing, are therefore also necessary (p.277).

Schools in disadvantaged areas tend to have:

- More limited human and community resources, so are vulnerable to devolved governance arrangements.
- Difficulties attracting quality Principals and staff, so are vulnerable when autonomy/independence places more demands, including specialised expertise.
- Fewer local services and opportunities available for children, their families and schools to draw on.

These characteristics can work against schools being able to benefit from increased local autonomy. Importantly, the Productivity Commission has identified the conditions under which school autonomy could be effective:

To be effective, greater autonomy needs to be matched with systems for accountability. In the context of educational disadvantage, this would imply that school leaders need to set goals for their school, measure and assess their progress, and be held accountable for outcomes.... In addition to academic outcomes and attendance rates, other indicators to measure a school's progress towards overcoming educational disadvantage could be used, including whether students have a positive attitude towards school, how strongly students feel connected to their school, and the strength of their parents' involvement (p.277).

The Smith Family strongly supports this view. Greater autonomy must only take place within a systems wide accountability framework so that progress and the

educational outcomes being achieved by children and young people can be tracked.

The Smith Family notes the Discussion Paper's approach to assessing a school's readiness to become more 'independent'. The Smith Family supports the view that the degree of autonomy available to a school should take account of a range of factors and that one approach will not be appropriate for all schools. However, given the potential benefits of increased autonomy for schools, The Smith Family would also urge a stronger focus on approaches which can prepare schools, particularly those in disadvantaged communities and/or supporting disadvantaged students, for increased local school autonomy. (see Section 3 for how we believe Local School Autonomy can be supported in schools supporting disadvantaged communities).

Section 3: Parent, Community and Education Partnerships

The research literature is clear on the importance of parent, community and education partnerships if the educational outcomes, particularly of disadvantaged children and young people are to be improved. The Smith Family would urge the Northern Territory Government to make such partnerships a hallmark of the way schools in the Territory operate.

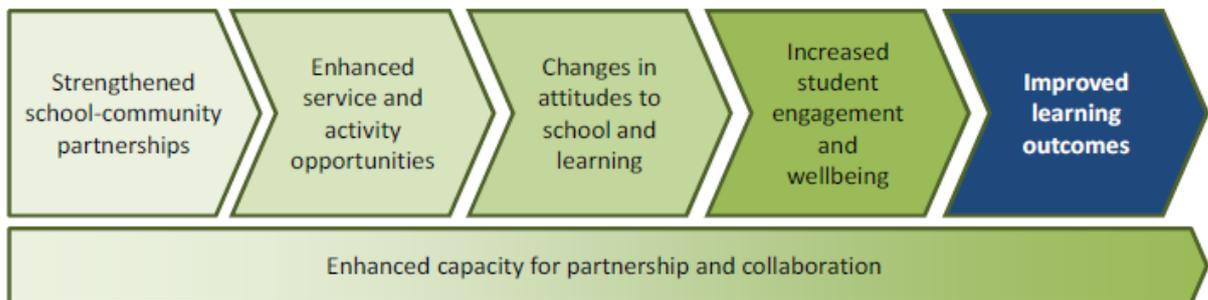
The Smith Family's experience in schools across Australia, including in the Northern Territory, affirms that through collaborative, long-term school-community partnerships, which involve clear planning processes, use evidence based initiatives and have a strong focus on data collection and evaluation to drive continuous improvement, educational outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people can be improved. The quality of our partnerships with schools has been recognised nationally through the National Australia Bank *Schools First* awards for our partnerships with Karama and Gray Primary Schools. It is within the context of these types of partnerships that local school autonomy can provide significant benefit, including for schools supporting disadvantaged students.

The Smith Family has 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. The Smith Family **School Community Hub** model is based on the premise that schools cannot be expected to do the work of improving student outcomes alone, particularly in schools serving communities characterised by socio-economic disadvantage (DEECD, 2013).

School-Community Hubs are an effective way of harnessing the necessary resources and expertise needed to support the learning and wellbeing of young

people, especially those facing disadvantage. They provide the governance and accountability structures needed for effective collaboration between school education systems and the community, business, philanthropic and local government sectors (Black, 2008). The Hubs are responsive to the local needs of the school community, leverage new and existing resources and are a platform for targeted and coordinated activities and services that increase student and family engagement in schools and improve student learning outcomes.

The logic of School Community Hubs



(DEECD, 2013)

The Smith Family currently has six School-Community Hubs across three Australian states, including in Western Australia, where three primary schools and a secondary school, including Independent Public Schools, comprise a Hub. Within each of the six hubs, The Smith Family acts as a broker across a number of schools and other local stakeholders – business, government, community agencies – to more efficiently direct resources to support the retention and achievement of children in education.

The Hubs affirm the essential educational leadership role principals play within and beyond the school community within a collaborative and shared accountability framework. An important corollary is that to be successful, principals must not be unduly burdened by administrative and financial responsibilities, associated with developing and maintaining the cross-sectoral partnerships needed to help improve student outcomes. Non-government organisations, such as The Smith Family, are particularly well placed to act as a facilitator in these types of partnerships, bringing not only additional resources from across the business and philanthropic sectors, but also the skills to work with a diversity of organisations to achieve the common goal of improved educational outcomes for disadvantaged children. They also bring a strong focus on monitoring and reviewing progress.

An external evaluation of four hubs in Victoria has concluded that “the Hub pilots have had a real impact on students, schools families and communities.

- **Students** have improved school readiness, increased engagement in learning and motivation, enhanced education and employment pathways and increased literacy and numeracy.
- **Schools** are student and family friendly, enriching environments, building staff and enhancing the capacity to partner.
- **Families** are more engaged in schools and their child's learning, and have more opportunities to input to their child's education.
- **Community** is increasingly engaged in student programs and there is more access for community partners to work with schools" (DEECD, 2013).

The approach of coordinating new and existing resources (both financial and other) in a way which flexibly responds to the particular needs and challenges of the community, is both an efficient and effective way of improving a range of outcomes, including educational and other social service outcomes. As such, we see School Community Hubs as an excellent complement to the core policy platforms of local school autonomy and parent engagement.

The Smith Family has a range of strong school community partnerships with a number of the schools it works with in the Territory, including Gray and Milner Primary Schools and Rosebery Middle School (see report *Improving young people's educational outcomes through school business community partnerships* (2014) for details of some of these partnerships)¹

The Smith Family would urge that these more comprehensive approaches to parent, community and education partnerships and School-Community Hubs be further expanded within the Territory.

Section 5: Enrolment, Attendance and Youth Participation

Vocational education and training

The Smith Family fully endorses the commentary within the Discussion Paper of the importance of school-based vocational education and training, including school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, and that this should be acknowledged within the *Education Act* (NT).

¹ This report is available at http://www.thsmithfamily.com.au/~media/Files/Research%20and%20Advocacy%20PDFs/Research%20and%20Evaluation%20page%20PDFs/Partnership_Brokers_Report_2014.ashx

Section 6: Government School Operations

The contexts and circumstances of young people's lives

The way schools operate clearly needs to take account of the contexts and circumstances of young peoples' lives, which are increasingly complex and diverse. The Smith Family has significant experience of the particular challenges facing children and young people from disadvantaged families. Many children in the Northern Territory are living in households that receive less than 50% of the Australian median household income. This can significantly impact on the capacity of families to support their children's education and their ability to provide the range of resources both at home and for school, which are often assumed as 'normal' by the education system. This is particularly important in the context of options for reform of voluntary contributions.

The Making a difference research

The *Making a Difference*² research led by the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW, and in which The Smith Family was a key partner, interviewed a large number of 11 to 17 year olds living in economic adversity. It highlighted that many of these young people were missing out on key educational opportunities such as school camps, excursions, and sport and recreational activities, due to the limited finances of their families. These types of opportunities, are an important part of the school curriculum. They provide opportunities for new skills to be learnt and practised and for young people to develop their confidence and leadership and social skills.

A number of the young people also consciously chose less expensive subjects at school, particularly elective subjects which can attract additional costs (eg for materials), as a way of easing the pressure on their family's household budget. This meant they sometimes chose subjects they weren't particularly interested in, or ones which didn't match their natural skills and abilities.

The Smith Family notes that one of the options for reform in the Discussion Paper is to provide legislative backing for providing that a school/school council may determine a level of parental voluntary contribution. The Smith Family understands the rationale for such a contribution and that there would potentially be a 'guarantee a student won't be disadvantaged if payments can't be made'. Even within this context, care needs to be taken to ensure that children and families who are not able to contribute are not made to feel excluded (either directly or indirectly), nor that their educational participation is hampered by their

² Skattebol J et al (2012) *Making a difference: Building on young people's perspectives of economic adversity*

inability to make a financial contribution. Our experience working with disadvantaged families and borne out by the *Making a Difference* research, is that sometimes families can experience subtle pressure from schools in this area and/or there maybe decisions made by schools, families and young people that can have a negative impact on young people's participation in education which stems from a lack of family resources.

Student records and data

As identified in the introductory section of this submission, The Smith Family has a strong focus on evaluation and the use of data to both better support students and to assess the effectiveness of our work with them. We have invested in a custom-designed database and in-house research team to enable detailed data analysis, including longitudinal analysis and for particular cohorts of students. This work directly informs our work with children, young people and their families. We therefore support the collection and use of data to better inform decision making in relation to the delivery of education in the Northern Territory. Such collection and use must of course consider appropriate privacy and confidentiality issues.

In considering how data might be shared with other government agencies, consideration should also be given to how data might be shared with non-government organisations, in particular circumstances, and with individuals and organisations undertaking educational research and evaluation. The Smith Family's Research and Advocacy team has developed a strong relationship with the NSW Department of Education's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation and significant new knowledge is being gained through appropriate sharing and analysis of data. This approach is contributing to better informed decision making and more targeted program delivery. The Smith Family would urge that consideration be given to similar reciprocal research and evaluation relationships being developed in the Northern Territory with organisations such as The Smith Family.

Advisory Councils

The Smith Family supports the importance of Advisory Councils as a means of informing the work of both the Minister and the wider Department. The Smith Family would urge, in the context of such Advisory Councils, that consideration be given to the important role that non-government and community organisations play in supporting educational outcomes for children and young people.

The Smith Family would question the need to enshrine specific ministerial advisory councils in legislation, as needs can change over time. Such specificity, if it was enshrined, should not exclude other advisory councils being established as

the need arises, with all advisory councils being reviewed after an appropriate time period to ensure ongoing relevance.

Section 8: Accountability

As discussed above, accountability and performance improvement must be a key platform for the delivery of education, with this accountability being transparent to stakeholders and the wider community. The purpose of such accountability is to ensure that there is a strong focus on educational outcomes for all students and that resources can be allocated to where they are most needed. Accountability measures should take account of the school's student population and improvements tracked over time, as The Smith Family is doing with its Attendance, Advancement to Year 12 and Engagement Rates.

The Smith Family is supportive of an accountability approach which includes peer review and collaborative support and one which places a high value of parent and community engagement.

Section 9: Streamlining

Early childhood

The Smith Family is supportive of consideration being given to issuing a unique student identifier to children in an early childhood service operated by the NT Government. The capacity to track child outcomes over time will help build the important evidence base in the Northern Territory context of what works to support children to achieve key outcomes. It also offers the capacity to provide children with the support they need in a more timely manner.

Conclusion

The Smith Family welcomes the reform of the *Education Act* (NT) and would be happy to expand on any of the issues raised in this submission.

C. REFERENCES

Black (2008). *Beyond the classroom : building new school networks*. Victoria, Australian, Council for Educational Research.

Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2008) *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*

Productivity Commission (2012) *Schools workforce*. Productivity Commission Research report, Melbourne

United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1990

Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) (May 2013) *Evaluation of the Extended School Hub pilot project: Final evaluation report, Executive summary*. Report prepared by I&J Management Services.

Appendix A: The Smith Family's outcomes framework



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