everyone's family

National Education Evidence Base

Submission on the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper

May 2016

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NATIONAL EDUCATION EVIDENCE BASE

Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base, given the importance of educational outcomes for individuals and Australia as a whole.

The national context for this Inquiry includes data which shows that a significant proportion of young Australians are not achieving key educational milestones, including in the early years, school and post-school transitions (Lamb et al. 2015). The consequence of this is felt at the individual level, as educational attainment is an important predictor of an individual's future employment, health and welfare prospects (Victorian Auditor General 2012).

The consequences of poor educational outcomes are also experienced at the community and national level, as economic growth and social development are closely related to the skills of a country's population (OECD 2015).

The educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians

About a quarter of all young Australians are not meeting key educational outcomes. The situation is particularly acute for certain groups, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, those living in non-metropolitan areas and those attending schools with a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Educational disadvantage is experienced early in Australia and continues throughout school and into post-school life. For example:

- **Starting school**
  One in three children in the most disadvantaged communities in Australia is developmentally vulnerable in one or more key areas when they start school (Australian Government 2016).

- **NAPLAN**
  94% of Year 5 students who have parents with a university qualification achieve above the national minimum standard in numeracy (NAPLAN). The figure is 61% for students whose parents have not completed Year 12 (ACARA 2015).

- **Year 12 completion**
  Around 60% of young people from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds complete Year 12. This compares to around 90% for those from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds (Lamb et al. 2015).

- **Post-school engagement**
  41% of 24 years olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are not fully engaged in work or study, compared to 17% of those from the most advantaged backgrounds (Lamb et al. 2015).

Even when students from disadvantaged backgrounds have the same capabilities as those from advantaged backgrounds, they do not make the same academic progress as they move through school. By the time students who have high Year 3 NAPLAN scores reach Year 9, those from disadvantaged backgrounds will be one and three quarter years behind their advantaged peers (Goss et al. 2016).

This educational data is both a compelling rationale for this Productivity Commission Inquiry and context for what might be required if Australia is to further develop a national education evidence base. Critical for understanding and addressing the current gaps in educational achievement is having data which identifies which groups of young people are not achieving and what progress they make over time. The latter is particularly important given significant investments are made to address educational disadvantage.

Funding of programs to improve educational outcomes of disadvantaged students

An additional context for this Inquiry is the significant focus by governments, educational systems and a range of other organisations across Australia, on funding programs to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students.

A report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (Rorris et al. 2011) noted that for the financial year 2009 -10, $4.4 billion was a conservative estimate of national aggregate government funding of programs to address educational disadvantage. The report concluded however that “There were insufficient data available to establish to what extent existing programs are effective in reducing the impact of disadvantage on educational outcomes because few have been evaluated, and fewer still have been evaluated with student outcomes as a focus” (Rorris et al. 2011 p. xvi).

The poor educational outcomes being achieved by disadvantaged young Australians, despite the significant investment by governments over multiple years highlight the importance of the current Inquiry. Australia can and must be better in supporting all young Australians to achieve educationally and do so in a cost-effective way. Better use of an enhanced national education evidence base is a critical component of Australia’s capacity to do this.

The Smith Family

The organisational context for the comments made in this submission is of a national non-government organisation with a mission to support the long-term educational participation of disadvantaged young Australians. The Smith Family supports around 125,000 disadvantaged children, young people, their parents/cares and community professionals a year.

The Smith Family’s largest program is its *Learning for Life* educational scholarship. There are 34,000 highly disadvantaged students on this long-term program. The Smith Family has invested in developing the capability to systematically track and analyse the educational outcomes being achieved by these students. This investment has been made in order to both assess and improve the effectiveness of the *Learning for Life* program and to contribute to national educational policy development.

The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program has a nationally unique longitudinal dataset of highly disadvantaged students. Analysis of this dataset over the last four years, has led the organisation to undertake a range of program implementation refinements. The outcome of these refinements has been year-on-year improvements in three key outcome measures:

- School attendance
- School completion
- Post-school engagement in employment, education and further training.

This submission draws on this organisational experience, the insights gained and the lessons learnt, to respond to a number of the questions and issues raised by the Inquiry's discussion paper. A detailed explanation of the data, analysis and evidence base of The Smith Family will be provided, both to provide visibility of what is being undertaken and as a possible prompt for additional issues and questions that the Inquiry may explore in subsequent stages.

The *Learning for Life* program

Students from disadvantaged families can begin on the *Learning for Life* program in their first year of school and potentially continue on the program to the end of tertiary study. The program is based on the principles of the ecological model which the Inquiry's discussion paper identifies as 'determinants of educational outcomes' (p 7). The program recruits families through partner schools in 94 communities across every state and territory.

The program is an early intervention approach and based on research showing that children from disadvantaged families are likely to achieve poorer outcomes without additional targeted support. The criteria for inclusion on the program are:

- Family must be low income, as evidenced by them having a Government Health Care Card or being on a pension.
- The child is attending a partner school in one of 94 communities.
- The family agrees to enter into a Family Partnership Agreement which acknowledges a shared commitment to the student's educational participation.

Characteristics of students and families on the *Learning for Life* program

A range of additional demographic data is also collected on the students and families supported by the program. This data highlights that the extent of disadvantage being experienced goes well beyond financial disadvantage. As a group, the profile of students on the program is:

- **Family structure** – over half live in a single parent family. A further six percent live with their grandparents, other family members or are in foster care.
- **Disability and health** – 40% of students and 50% of parents/carers have a health or disability issue.
- **Parental education** – 60% have a parent/carer who has not completed Year 12.
- **Parental employment** – over 70% have a parent/carer who is not in paid employment.
- **Student mobility** – 20% of students in Years 5 to 12 have attended four or more schools and 5% have been at six or more.

Comparing *Learning for Life* students with their peers in the same school

The Smith Family has also secured school-level data from each of the state jurisdictions which enables comparisons to be made between *Learning for Life* students and their peers in the same schools. This is important in understanding the relative extent of disadvantage being experienced and for assessing any potential impact of the *Learning for Life* program.

Table 1 compares *Learning for Life* students attending disadvantaged schools in New South Wales with their peers in the same schools. It shows that *Learning for Life* students are:

- More likely to be of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.
- Far less likely to have a parent who has completed Year 12 or university or who is in employment.

Table 1: *Learning for Life* students in NSW compared with their peers in disadvantaged schools

Characteristic	**Total school population*** **(%)**	***Learning for Life* students in the same schools*** **(%)**
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background	14	25
Parent/carer Year 12 completion or post-school education**	80	39
Parent/carer university education***	13	3
Parent/carer employed	79	18

Note: *Sample of 50 low socio-economic schools with 30 or more *Learning for Life* students. **Post-school education includes: Certificates I-IV; Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Associate Degree; Bachelor Degree; Graduate Diploma, Graduate Certificate; Postgraduate Degree.***Bachelor's Degree or higher. The NSW Department of Education and Communities provided data to enable this analysis.

The data from all state jurisdictions reflects a similar profile of *Learning for Life* students compared to their school peers. These are clearly young people who are at risk of poor educational outcomes.

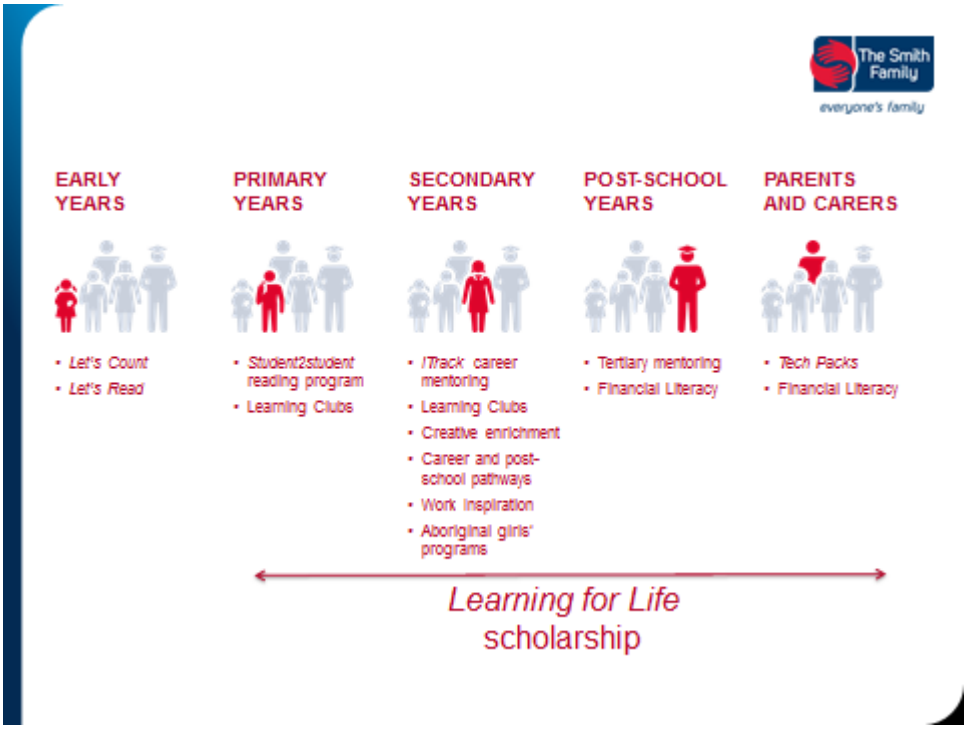
Components of *Learning for Life*

Learning for Life has three components:

- A modest **biannual payment** to help families cover education-related expenses, such as books, uniforms and excursions.
- A *Learning for Life* **Program Coordinator** (The Smith Family staff member) who works with the family to support their child's long-term participation in education.
- Access to a **range of shorter programs** that begin in the early years and continue through to the tertiary level. They include literacy and numeracy programs, learning clubs, mentoring and career activities. They target different

stages of a young person's life as well as providing support to their parents around digital and financial literacy skills, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Key short programs at different life stages that are part of *Learning for Life*



Measuring the outcomes of *Learning for Life*

Outcomes Based Accountability

The Smith Family uses the Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) framework to assess and track the short and longer-term outcomes being achieved by students on the *Learning for Life* program. The OBA framework uses three key questions to help organisations assess program performance:

1. **Quantity**
   How much program was delivered? (for example how many students were supported).
2. **Quality**
   How well was it delivered? (for example how many students completed the program).
3. **Outcomes and impact**
   Is anyone better off? (for example what proportion of students improved their reading age or completed Year 12).

The Smith Family collects data across all three of these areas - quantity, quality and impact - with the most important being the outcomes achieved by program participants.

Tracking student progress

Each student on the *Learning for Life* program has a unique student identifier which enables their individual progress to be tracked over time, including when students move school or community. Demographic and outcomes data is collected on all students and entered into a purpose built database. This allows for systematic analysis of the progress and outcomes being achieved by both individual students and different groups of students, such as those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds of those whose parents are not in employment. This analysis helps identify where additional student support or program refinements may be required.

Short-term outcomes

Students who participate on the *Learning for Life* scholarship can access a range of shorter programs that help support their educational achievement and engagement (see Figure 1).

The Smith Family uses the OBA framework to measure a range of outcomes for these programs, including increases in students' reading age, school engagement, motivation, confidence, knowledge of careers and post-school pathways and changes in behaviours. The focus is on both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes given the contribution both make to long-term educational success.

Three key long-term outcomes

The shorter term outcomes identified above are the foundations or stepping stones for the achievement of three longer-term outcomes that The Smith Family is tracking for participants of the *Learning for Life* program. These outcomes have been measured since 2012 and are:

1. School attendance (Attendance Rate)
2. School completion (Advancement Rate)
   and
3. Post-school engagement in employment, education and training (Engagement Rate).

These outcomes were chosen because of their research, policy and practice relevance. Research shows the clear links between attendance, achievement, school completion and post-school participation in employment, education and training. These outcomes are important for the long-term economic and social wellbeing of young people.

The long-term outcomes are also policy relevant as they are included in the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) National Education Agreement 2009.They are also relevant to the Closing the Gap agreement, which seeks to reduce the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other Australians, across a range of key educational areas.

The outcomes are practice relevant to the *Learning for Life* program as they directly relate to the program's aims and how it is implemented.

The relationship between the short and longer-term outcomes is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Relationship between the short and longer-term outcomes of the *Learning for Life* program

School attendance data

The Smith Family first identified school attendance as one of its three key outcome measures in 2011. This was in advance of consistent reporting of school attendance across Australian jurisdictions. The Smith Family receives student reports directly from families on the *Learning for Life* program, in order that school attendance and achievement can be monitored.

Given the high level of mobility of students on the program, there are *Learning for Life* students in around 4,000 (or 40%) Australian schools. While there may now be more national consistency on the reporting of attendance data than previously, the range of school reports which The Smith Family receives highlights the continued variation across jurisdictions. The Smith Family has needed to develop a reporting methodology which allows it to deal with this variation, in order to monitor the school attendance of *Learning for Life* students. The end result of the measurement of the Attendance Rate is not 'perfect' but is a consequence of this variation.

The Smith Family annually reports on the average school attendance rates of *Learning for Life* students across primary, secondary and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It also analyses the data by attendance deciles and given the longitudinal nature of the dataset, it tracks changes over time to individual students' attendance rates. In combination, this enables more targeted support to be provided to students who are struggling with attendance.

Table 2 includes the average school attendance rates for *Learning for Life* students from 2012 to 2014.

Table 2: Average school attendance rates for *Learning for Life* students, 2012 to 2014

Students	2012 (%)	2013 (%)	2014 (%)
Primary school	90.4	91.2	91.3
Secondary school	84.6	86.0	86.9
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	85.2	86.9	87.3

Note: In line with national data collection practices, this data is for students in Years 1 to 10.

School completion data

The Smith Family tracks the proportion of Year 10 scholarship holders who advance to Year 12 or equivalent while still on scholarship. The Advancement Rate is a longitudinal measure which tracks individual students' progression through school. Data is analysed across a range of characteristics, such as Indigeneity, gender, parental education and employment, as well as academic achievement in English and Maths and school attendance data. As the data gathered on students continues to increase, there will be further opportunity for analysis across a range of other factors such as the number and type of shorter programs that a student has participated in over the time they are on the *Learning for Life* scholarship.

Having an organisational focus on Year 12 completion has seen a range of strategies developed in response to the year-on-year Advancement Rate data. These strategies have contributed to a significant increase in the proportion of young people on scholarship completing Year 12 or equivalent as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Advancement Rate of students on the *Learning for Life* program

2010-2012		2011-2013		2012-2014		2013- 2015	
Advance-ment Rate %	Number of students	Advance-ment Rate %	Number of students	Advance-ment Rate %	Number of students	Advance-ment Rate %	Number of students
59.6	1,455	62.5	1,662	63.2	1,645	68.2	1,778

A total of 6,540 highly disadvantaged young Australians have been supported by the program to complete Year 12 or equivalent over the past four years.

National school completion data

One of the challenges regarding the reporting of school completion rates in Australia is that there is no national data that directly monitors student transitions throughout the course of their education. Most national approaches taken by government agencies use a cross-sectional approach, rather than the longitudinal approach taken by The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program.

The use of cross-sectional (and 'indirect') measures of school completion means 'apparent' retention rates are reported (for eg by ACARA and ABS). This is not ideal given there is significant investment and interest in increasing the proportion of young people completing Year 12 and a range of strategies maybe being pursued without the more accurate longitudinal data being collected to assess their effectiveness.

Post school engagement data

The Smith Family assesses the post-school engagement of former *Learning for Life* students through a biennial phone survey. Post-school engagement in work or study is a critical outcome for the short and longer-term wellbeing of young people and a key to assessing the effectiveness of the program.

The survey is conducted with students who leave the program in Years 10, 11 and 12 and assesses their engagement in employment, education and training a year after leaving the program. The survey is informed by similar work undertaken by the ABS, though their data tends to be reported on in five year age groupings, eg 15 to 19 years, 20 to 24 years. Table 4 reports on the 2013 and 2015 Engagement Rate surveys.

Table 4: Engagement in employment, education and training of former *Learning for Life* students, 2013 and 2015

	Overall Engagement Rate (%)	Fully engaged* in employment, education or training (%)	Partly engaged* in employment, education or training (%)
2013			
All students	79.6	61.7	17.9
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students	70.0	56.0	14.0
2015			
All students	84.2	65.8	18.4
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students	74.2	54.6	19.6

***Fully engaged means participation in employment, education or training for 35 hours a week or more. Partly engaged means participation in these activities for less than 35 hours a week.

The longitudinal nature of the data collected on *Learning for Life* students means that the data can be used both for evaluation and research purposes. The latter includes assessing the relationship between a range of factors and characteristics and post-school engagement. This analysis is also helping to inform ongoing program refinements.

National post-school engagement data

National measures of post-school engagement rely on ABS surveys or the national population Census conducted every five years. A range of states also have 'destination' surveys but these do not necessarily provide a consistent national view of young people's post-school engagement in work or further study. Methodologies and response rates vary across these destination surveys.

The annual Report on Government Services which is produced by the Productivity Commission provides a measure of school leaver destination for young people aged 15 to 19 and 20 to 24. This relies on the Survey of Education and Work, rather than a Census. The data is reported by state and by highest level of school completed, however there is limited other data available, particularly that would help contribute to the body of evidence regarding 'what works' to improve post-school transitions.

Data on particular groups of students

Data on particular groups of students' educational and post-school engagement outcomes, such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and those living in non-metropolitan areas, is important, given that at an aggregate level these students tend to have poorer educational and employment outcomes than their peers. Outcomes data is often not available for these key groups, or not available on a consistent and national basis. This includes for example the use of different definitions of 'low socioeconomic'. The result can be that aggregate data 'hides' important differences in the outcomes being achieved by different groups of young Australians. For low SES young people, for example, reporting on combined data for the bottom three deciles can mask how the most disadvantaged young Australians are performing. In combination, this is problematic for good public policy.

The Smith Family would argue that one aim for Australia's education system should be to 'limit' the influence or relationship between a student's family and personal circumstances and the educational outcomes achieved. In a nation aiming to maximise the contribution and development of all young people, educational outcomes should not be determined by family backgrounds. Having data sufficiently nuanced to make an assessment on the extent to which this is true in Australia is important.

The former COAG Reform Council previously published an annual report on national educational outcomes which reported progress on the National Education Agreement. Data was broken down by a range of factors such as Indigeneity, location, gender and SES. The consistent format and high readability of these documents meant they made a useful contribution to public policy. More recently the Mitchell Institute's report *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out,* provided very useful outcomes data by deciles. It provides a more nuanced understanding than is generally available of how young Australians are performing.

How The Smith Family has used data

As identified earlier in this submission there have been year on year improvements in the Attendance, Advancement and Engagement Rates of *Learning for Life* students over the past four years. This has been an outcome of a whole of organisation focus on using data to improve the effectiveness of the program.

The data has been analysed in a variety of ways – including for individual students, by various characteristics, for groups of students and longitudinally. This analysis has resulted in:

- More tailored support for particular groups of students and at particular times in their educational journey. This includes those who are struggling with school attendance, students transitioning to high school or senior secondary school and students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.
- Changes to the frequency and nature of engagement with families, particularly taking account of those students who need additional support.
- Re-defining the roles of staff working directly with families, increased role specialisation and reorganising the structure of the workforce in order to provide more targeted and effective support.
- The development of approaches which better support students' career pathways.
- Training for all *Learning for Life* staff on how to work more effectively with highly disadvantaged families and refined induction programs for new staff.

For The Smith Family, the value and purpose of collecting data is to enable an assessment of the effectiveness of its programs and in turn to enhance that effectiveness. This also supports public accountability for the significant funds raised by the organisation. We would argue that critical to the rationale for collecting educational data is so that it can be used to improve the educational outcomes of children and young people. We would urge that this become a more central principle for all Australian educational data collection.

National clearinghouse

A key use of data should be to contribute to building an evidence base for what works to improve educational outcomes. As the Rorris report cited earlier noted, there has been significant investment in programs aimed at improving outcomes for disadvantaged young people. This investment is on top of the very large amounts invested in education funding generally. Despite this quantum of funding, Australia still remains well behind where it might be in answering the key public policy question – "what initiatives work for which groups of students and under what circumstances?"

There is currently no systemic way in Australia for sharing evaluation and research efforts in education. Other areas of public policy have developed Clearinghouses for sharing knowledge and good practice in 'what works' and ideally what 'doesn't work'. Other areas have also developed formal processes for accrediting evidence based programs (see for example the Commonwealth's *Communities for Children* program). Yet these approaches are absent nationally in education, despite important contributions from organisations such as the NSW's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. The lack of a national clearinghouse results in significant inefficiencies and a reduced likelihood of effective and scalable initiatives being developed and implemented across Australia. The end result is not only wasted resources but even more critically the failure to implement effective initiatives that positively impact on young people's educational outcomes.

The Smith Family would urge the Inquiry to consider what systemic responses are needed to not only have available the data required to build the national education evidence base, including the evidence of the impact of educational initiatives.

Other areas of comment

There are a number of current national and international surveys which are contributing to the development of a national education evidence base. The development of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), for example, has been an outstanding and highly valued achievement. The AEDC provides a clear picture of how children are travelling across a range of key measures in the first year of school. These measures have been shown to be critical for children's long-term success. The availability of data at multiple levels, including the community level, and over multiple years, means that the data can be used to target the particular needs of children in a local area.

National and international tests such as NAPLAN and PISA, particularly when used in combination with other data, can provide rich insights into the comparative educational progress of young people, including different groups of young people. These can contribute to inform education policy and investment.

Longitudinal surveys such as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) also offer key insights into the development of children over time. LSAC will become increasingly useful the longer the data is collected and analysed. It is hoped that more educational researchers will use LSAC to help better understand children's educational pathways and what influences these pathways.

Data characteristics

The list of data characteristics provided on page 12 of the discussion paper is a useful list. The Smith Family would particularly emphasise the need for data to be available for different population groups. If there are different data collections for different population groups (for eg a separate Indigenous data collection), then these should be collected concomitantly to allow for meaningful comparisons.

In addition to the data needing to be granular, there is also the need for it to be able to be aggregated. For research and evaluation purposes, ideally data is available at the unit record level (de-identified), with sufficient information such as SES, age, gender, location etc to enable the data to be analysed in different ways depending on the research or evaluation question.

It is also important that data collected is used and not merely stored. As the discussion paper points out there is a vast amount of educational data collected but it is uncertain (and indeed unlikely) that all of it is used and useful. This is not in line with good data collection principles.

Benefits of data collection (page 13)

Consistent national data collection provides the opportunity to benchmark student achievement, to identify the impact of different programs and the areas of greatest need. Comparing different programs however often requires a significant amount of data to ensure that student populations are similar on a range of key variables. It is important that conclusions are not made on the comparative impact of various programs without there being a clear understanding of the characteristics of the students participating in a program.

Characteristics of data collection that support the processes of monitoring, evaluation and policy development include frequency (ie regular collection), as well as confounding variables such as parental and school level variables and student demographic information. There is increasingly opportunity to link datasets, such as health and social security, which has the capacity to considerably influence public policy and investment.

Policy makers, the education sector and researchers are all potential beneficiaries of enhancing education data collection in Australia. However the most significant potential beneficiaries are young Australians, if this data can be used to improve educational policy and delivery in Australia. Longer-term, this will have widespread community, national and intergenerational impact.

Conclusion

This submission has drawn on the experience of a national non-government organisation to raise some of key issues relating to the current and potential education evidence base. The Smith Family welcomes this Inquiry and urges that it consider not only the nature and extent of data collected but also how such data is used to deepen knowledge and understanding of 'what works' and what 'doesn't work' to improve the educational outcomes of young Australians. This knowledge should in turn inform educational public policy and implementation with the goal being to improve the educational achievements of all young Australians, particularly those who currently are not meeting key milestones.

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Table 5: 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	Borroloola	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			