



everyone's family

Draft for consultation ***Advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training action plan***

Submission

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Executive summary

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Queensland Government's draft *Advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training Action Plan*. This submission identifies a range of areas in the plan which are particularly welcome, including its strengths based approach, the focus on excellence, the recognition of the importance of partnerships and the acknowledgement of the critical role of monitoring progress.

The Smith Family would also urge that the plan be refined to include an explicit focus on the education and training needs of Aboriginal girls and women, given the particular importance that education plays for females.

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. Details on our Board of Directors and Advisory Group on Issues Concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are included in the Appendix.

In 2015-16 our programs were delivered in 94 communities across all States and Territories, including 16 communities in Queensland¹. These programs supported over 127,000 disadvantaged children, young people and their families, including 28,000 in Queensland. This includes over 3,700 Queenslanders from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Our approach is an early intervention one and focuses on providing long-term support for disadvantaged children, young people and their families, in order that these young people achieve educationally.

Areas included in the plan which are particularly welcome

There are a range of areas included in the draft plan which The Smith Family particularly welcomes. These include:

- The inclusion of early childhood, school education and training within the one plan, given the relationship between success and achievement across these areas. This approach serves to put children and young people at the centre of the plan and focuses on their educational journey.
- The plan's focus on excellence. It is not sufficient for example to focus just on 'national minimum standards' (in NAPLAN) or 'closing the gap', important as these efforts are. The goal must be for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to realise their full potential.

¹ A list of communities is included in the Appendix.

- The strengths based approach taken. It is essential that there is recognition and respect for the culture, knowledge, skills, capabilities, resilience, hopes and dreams of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

The recognition of the importance of partnerships involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, government agencies, teachers, school leaders and other educators, the non-government sector and employers. The Smith Family would also note the importance of working collaboratively with the Commonwealth Government given their role in supporting the education and training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

- The focus on more holistic and responsive services, through for example, Children and Family Centres. This is critical given the range of needs families may have.
- The emphasis on regular monitoring of progress. This is essential and monitoring data needs to be made publicly available, to ensure there is clear accountability and progress can be tracked. The Smith Family would urge that data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be available by characteristics such as gender and location, given this can provide important insights on the outcomes being achieved by particular groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We would also recommend that data for Kindergarten go beyond enrolment to focus on attendance. We would also urge that for NAPLAN, the emphasis is on students being above the national minimum standard, given that this standard has been shown to be low (see for eg Grattan Institute's 2016 report *Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress*). Our recommendations regarding data are in line with the plan's focus on excellence.
- The recognition of the importance of sharing learnings, evidence and good practice. This is critical if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are to be supported in ways that make a difference. Such sharing should include not only 'what worked for whom and under what circumstances', but also what was *not* effective. Given the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland and their geographical spread, Queensland could potentially take a national leadership role in efforts aimed at sharing learnings, evidence and good practice.
- A key part of advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training must be a focus on employment strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Such strategies must be comprehensive and focus on recruitment, retention and career progression.

Other potential areas for inclusion

In addition to the above, The Smith Family would recommend consideration be given to:

- The inclusion of programs in the plan, that target Aboriginal girls' education, noting that the plan already includes reference to the Aboriginal boys' education program, Clontarf. The rationale for this inclusion, is provided below, as is an example of an evidence based program which is improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal girls.
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- A stronger emphasis on cross-sectoral and jurisdictional coordination and collaboration, including with the non-government sector and business.

Improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal girls

Educational achievement is important for both males and females but Australian research shows it is particularly important for females. While males are more likely than females to leave school early, females who leave school without completing Year 12 have poorer post-school outcomes than males. Females who leave school early are much more likely than male early school leavers to be employed in low skill jobs, employed on a part-time basis, be unemployed or not in the labour force.²

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15 to 34, the positive influence of education on employment rates is stronger for women than for men.³ There is also a much greater education gradient for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females, relative to Aboriginal males, for many wellbeing measures. Research suggests that Aboriginal females may need to have a higher level of education than males, to experience the same level of wellbeing, self-efficacy and the ability to have a say in the community on important issues.⁴ Hence, The Smith Family's recommendation that the Draft Education and Training Plan include a focus on Aboriginal girls and women.

In Australia there is a large gap in the educational attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females compared with other females. Only 27 percent of Aboriginal women aged 15 years and over have completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared with 53 percent of non-Aboriginal women. This impacts on their future employment outcomes. The unemployment rate for Aboriginal women aged 15 years and over is high at 16.0 percent while their labour force participation rate is only 46.3 percent. This compares with 5.4 percent and 58.6 percent respectively for non-Aboriginal women.⁵

² Curtis D & McMillan J (2008) Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research report 54, Australian Council for Educational Research.

³ Karmet T et al (2014) *Improving labour market outcomes through education and training, Issues Paper no 9*, Australian Government.

⁴ Biddle N & Cameron T (2012) *Potential factors influencing Indigenous education participation and achievement*, NCVET.

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Census, 2011*.

The importance of education for Aboriginal girls goes beyond the impact it has on them as individuals. The World Health Organisation argues that women are often instrumental in bringing about social change through their role in the family and wider community.⁶ Supporting improvements in educational outcomes is associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women having a greater say in community decision making.⁷ Therefore investment in initiatives that support improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls can have a positive impact that extends well beyond the individuals involved.

Improving educational and post-school outcomes of Aboriginal girls

In recent years there has been a significant focus on improving the educational performance of Aboriginal boys and young men. A range of programs and strategies have been developed, with most using sport to attract and encourage participation.

Despite the importance of education for Aboriginal girls, there has been less focus on developing programs that support their improved educational outcomes. It has also been acknowledged that sport may be less effective in attracting and retaining the participation of girls in programs.⁸

A review of programs supporting improved educational and post-school outcomes for Aboriginal girls and women has identified a number of success factors, including:

- Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in program design.
- Meeting the holistic personal support, learning and development needs of participants and proactively addressing barriers to engagement.
- Encouraging and reinforcing positive aspirations, high expectations and goal setting.
- Providing a culturally safe environment where participants feel welcomed and valued.
- Program design and delivery that builds on participants' strengths, interests and capabilities.
- A wide-range of activities and learning opportunities that are tailored to the specific needs of the target group, promote cultural identity and support them to learn.
- Providing exposure to a range of education, employment and career options and information about how to navigate the education and employment systems.
- Developing participants' skills and providing opportunities to build personal, peer and professional networks.
- Employing appropriately qualified staff and facilitating strong participant-staff relationships.
- Supporting, encouraging and leveraging parent and community involvement, including collaboration with Aboriginal and mainstream organisations, networks and systems to support program delivery.
- Strong support from the school principal and leadership team.⁹

⁶ WHO (2014) *Investing in women and girls: progress in gender equality to reap health and social returns.*

⁷ Biddle N & Cameron T (2012)

⁸ ACER (2011) *Evaluation of the 'Sporting Chance' program.*

⁹ Doyle L & Hill R (2012) *The best of every woman: An overview of approaches for philanthropic investment in Aboriginal women and girls.*

Supporting Aboriginal girls' education: The *Girls at the Centre* program

In response to the clear need to better support the educational outcomes of Aboriginal girls, The Smith Family has been implementing its *Girls at the Centre* program since 2008. This program draws on the evidence of what works to support Aboriginal girls' educational and post-school outcomes and provides an intensive individualised approach for young women across their secondary years of schooling.

Originally developed at the request of the Alice Springs community, it has recently been expanded to Wagga Wagga in NSW at the invitation of the principal of Mount Austin High School. This request sought to meet the particular needs of Aboriginal girls in the school and complement support being provided to Aboriginal boys by the Clontarf Foundation. The program has also been extended to Bairnsdale Secondary College in Gippsland in Victoria.

Girls at the Centre builds on The Smith Family's relationships with families, schools and communities. It provides intensive and holistic support to girls, predominantly Aboriginal girls. Girls can participate on the program across Years 7 to 12, reflecting the importance of providing continuity of support across their high school years. This also enables peer-mentoring and leadership skills to be developed. Around 75 girls are supported on the program at each site each year.

Objectives of *Girls at the Centre*

The objectives of *Girls at the Centre* are to:

- Improve participants' school attendance and achievement and foster their long-term engagement in education.
- Increase participants' goals and aspirations for their future.
- Prepare participants to successfully transition from school to employment or further education.
- Enhance participants' life skills, including improved social and emotional wellbeing and resilience.
- Increase family engagement and support participants to develop positive relationships within the school and wider community.
- Encourage schools, communities and workplaces to support improved educational outcomes for participants.

Key components of *Girls at the Centre*

The program draws on the previously cited research on the success factors of programs aimed at improving educational and post-school outcomes of Aboriginal girls and women. A key focus of *Girls at the Centre* is to provide participants with access to role models and extended networks. This includes through Girl Coaches, (The Smith Family staff) who are available to the participants and their families on a daily basis, as well as a diverse range of external mentors including from education, business and the community.

The foundations for young women's post-school plans and aspirations are laid well before young adulthood, so *Girls at the Centre* has a strong focus on helping participants identify education and post-school goals and the steps needed to achieve these goals. This is facilitated through The Smith Family's strong partnerships with tertiary institutions and many diverse corporates.

A particular strength of *Girls at the Centre* is that while around three-quarters of participants are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls, the program also includes other girls from the school. This inclusive aspect was included in the program design at the request of the Aboriginal community. It assists in building relationships, breaking down stereotypes and broadening the networks available to participants.

The specifics of the program content are designed in consultation with the school community, the girls themselves and other relevant stakeholders, meaning the program is responsive and nuanced to local community needs. The range of program components available to participants includes:

- A financial scholarship: paid to families to help them cover education related expenses such as books, uniforms and excursions.
- Girl Coaches (staff of The Smith Family): providing support and guidance to the girls and their families, reinforcing high expectations regarding education and post-school outcomes, and liaising and advocating with school staff and community networks.
- Weekly after school extracurricular activities: that help develop skills, foster educational engagement and create a unifying experience for participants. Activities include careers exposure, arts, personal development and sports.
- Breakfast with a Mentor: mentors from a range of career, education and community backgrounds engage with the girls to help build their understanding of a range of future post-school pathways. Mentors include Aboriginal Elders.
- A Girls Room in the school: providing a welcoming and safe place for participants and their families to meet and engage with program staff.
- Parent engagement activities: a range of activities that help to strengthen relationships between students and their parents/carers, and increase parental support networks and involvement in the school.
- Camps and other experiential trips: these provide students with new educational experiences. They can include trips to universities, work places, cultural, entertainment and other activities.

In combination, *Girls at the Centre* provides a fully integrated, wrap-around program for participants, providing them with the academic, social and emotional support to succeed educationally and post-school.

Evaluation of *Girls at the Centre*

An independent evaluation of *Girls at the Centre* concluded that it:

- Significantly improves school attendance
- Positively impacts on life goals and skills
- Clearly impacts on community engagement with the school, especially through families
- Is highly valued by school staff, girl participants and their families.¹⁰

¹⁰ Lea T & Driscoll C (2012) *Evaluation of the 'Girls at the Centre' program*, Alice Springs, University of Sydney.

The Smith Family would urge that consideration be given to expanding in Queensland, evaluated programs which have been shown to be effective in improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal girls.

Educational scholarship programs and post school pathways

The Draft Plan includes the provision of educational scholarships to eligible Year 11 and 12 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It also indicates that the Department of Education and Training will work with Queensland universities to improve the preparation, access and transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and young people into higher education. Both of these initiatives are welcome.

In this context, The Smith Family would also draw attention to its long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*. In 2015-16, over 33,000 disadvantaged children and young people were supported on this program, including close to 7,000 in Queensland. In Queensland, around 1,300 of these young people are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Nationally, over 6,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are supported by *Learning for Life*.

The *Learning for Life* program is an early intervention initiative which provides long-term support to help disadvantaged children and young people improve their educational and post-school outcomes. Supporting parental and family engagement in their child's education is a core feature of the program. Students can begin on the program in the first year of school and continue through to the completion of tertiary studies. In Queensland, 325 tertiary students are supported each year, including over 20 who are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Partnerships with families, schools and other educational institutions, community organisations, philanthropy and business are central to the way the program is developed and delivered.

Learning for Life provides:

- Financial support for education related expenses (such as books and excursions).
- Support from a Program Coordinator to support the student's long-term participation in education.
- Access to a range of short programs that support educational engagement and achievement. These include literacy and numeracy programs, learning clubs, mentoring and career activities.

Educational outcomes are collected longitudinally for each student on the program, in order that progress can be tracked and additional support provided as required. Three long-term outcomes are collected, namely:

- School attendance
- School completion (Year 12 or equivalent)
- Post school engagement in employment and or/further study.

In addition, a range of shorter-term outcomes are tracked, such as:

- Improving literacy and numeracy
- Increasing confidence and self-efficacy

- Improving motivation and aspirations
- Enhancing networks and relationships
- Improving knowledge and understanding of study options and career paths.

Continuous evaluation ensures the ongoing refinement of the program. The program is already being delivered at scale in Queensland, including to significant numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and is achieving strong outcomes. Around three quarters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are in work and/or study 12 months after leaving the program, with the remainder actively engaged in looking for work and/or volunteering. The program is contributing to the goals of the Advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training plan.

The Smith Family looks forward to continuing to work in partnership in Queensland, to support the educational and post-school outcomes of disadvantaged young people, including those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Appendix

The Smith Family's Board of Directors

The Smith Family Board is comprised of up to 10 honorary non-executive directors and the Chief Executive Officer. The current Board membership is:

- Chairman: Christine Bartlett
- Arun Abey
- Leah Armstrong
- Christine Cawsey AM
- Tony Davis
- Jeremy Maycock
- Dr Jeffrey Harmer AO
- Mark Johnson
- Adrian Kloeden
- Rosa Storelli
- Chief Executive Officer: Dr Lisa O'Brien

Further details on the Board is available at www.thesmithfamily.com.au

The Smith Family's Advisory Group on Issues Concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

The Smith Family's Advisory Group on Issues Concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians provides advice and guidance about our approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities to maximise potential outcomes. The current membership of the Advisory Group is:

- Leah Armstrong
- Shawn Davis-Abra
- Jayde Geia
- Peter Farmer
- Dr Jeffrey Harmer AO
- Emily Jayne Knights
- Jason Masters
- John Rawnsley
- Leanne Smith
- Lidia Thorpe

Queensland communities in which The Smith Family is working		
Brighton	Brisbane	Caboolture
Cairns	Coolangatta	Coomera
Inala	Ipswich	Logan
Mackay	Maroochydore	Redlands
Rockhampton	Southport	Toowoomba
Townsville		