



everyone's family

Review of the Australian curriculum

Submission

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The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide this brief submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum. This submission draws on our extensive research and practice experience and provides commentary on three areas which we would urge be considered in reviewing the Australian curriculum:

1. Current Australian educational data
2. The goals of Australia's education system
and
3. The contexts and circumstances of young people's lives.

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 focuses on improving three key long term outcomes for the young people we support, namely:

- 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.

These outcomes align with the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) educational goals, which are in turn informed by research showing the importance of these outcomes for the long-term wellbeing of individuals and the nation as a whole.

The Smith Family's approach focuses on the multiple influences that research has shown impact on a young person's wellbeing and participation in education, namely:

- Personal characteristics/attributes – eg intelligence, social skills, health, self-esteem, attitudes, intentions

- Family – eg the resources they have access to, parental aspirations and engagement in their child's learning
- Peers – eg aspirations, attitudes to education, risk taking behaviour
- Learning and care institutions – eg teacher quality, student mix, school ethos, expectations of students
- Community – eg economic and infrastructure resources available, role models, social capital, cohesion and safety¹.

Our programs

As a non-government organisation, The Smith Family does not implement the Australian curriculum, however it has significant experience in delivering programs aimed at enhancing educational outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people, as outlined below.

Learning for life

Currently more than 34,000 children and young people from communities across Australia are supported through The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program. The program provides a family with: a financial scholarship to help pay for educational essentials such as uniforms, books, computers and excursions; support from a Smith Family staff member; and access to a range of programs from the early years to tertiary level, to help ensure young people are attending school and remaining engaged in education. These programs include literacy and numeracy programs, mentoring, learning clubs, career activities and creative enrichment programs. They build foundational skills, as well as enhance aspirations and confidence and expand the networks and resources young people can draw on, in particular around education, careers and employment.

Parental engagement is at the core of *Learning for Life*, with parents/carers entering into an agreement with The Smith Family that acknowledges their mutual commitment to supporting the young person's long term participation in education.

Partner schools

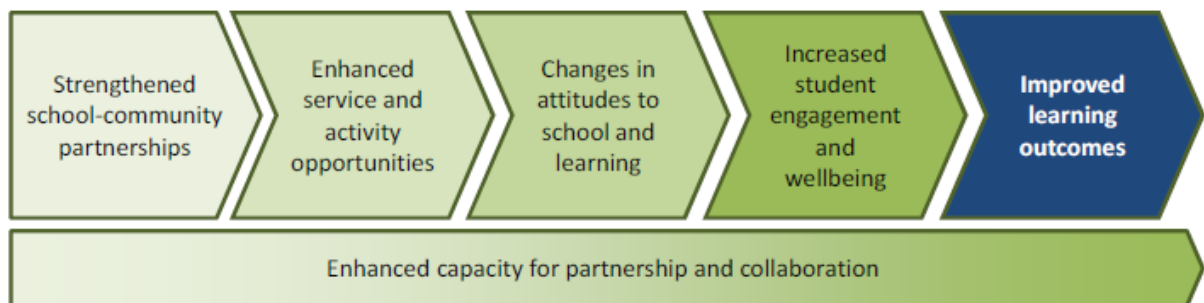
The Smith Family, while not operating as a school, has deep relationships with schools across Australia. This includes through schools being the platform for delivery for many of our programs, including *Learning for Life*. The Smith Family works closely with 542 partner schools across Australia as well as having students from over 4,000 schools participating on a *Learning for Life* scholarship.

¹ Urie Bronfenbrenner. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*.: Harvard University Press

School community hubs

The Smith Family is also a facilitator of five School-Community Hubs operating in clusters of schools in disadvantaged communities across Australia. 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)². 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 Hubs³



An external evaluation of four hubs in Victoria has concluded that they 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 schools⁴.

² Black (2008). *Beyond the classroom : building new school networks*. Victoria, Australian, Council for Educational Research.

³ 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.

⁴ Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) (May 2013) *ibid*.

Student2student program

While The Smith Family does not deliver the national curriculum, it does provide a range of programs which explicitly complement work undertaken in school, including in areas closely aligned to the national curriculum. An example of this is the *student2student* program which The Smith Family designed in 2000 and has been implementing with young people in communities across Australia since then.

Student2student is primarily aimed at students from Years 3 to 8 who have a reading age up to two years behind their chronological age. It matches them with reading buddies who are at least two years older, who have good reading skills and have been trained by The Smith Family to help support the development of the reading skills of the younger student.

Student2student runs over an 18 week period with the pair connecting over the phone two to three times a week, for at least 20 minutes at a time. The student reads to their buddy from books provided by The Smith Family which are appropriate to the student's reading level. As the program occurs in the student's home, participation is in addition to any literacy support they might receive at school. It also reinforces to the family, including siblings, the importance of reading, and provides an opportunity for parental engagement in their child's reading.

Of the 742 students who participated in *student2student* in 2012, 93% improved their reading age over the course of the program. Two thirds of the students improved their reading age by more than six months. Across students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, those from English speaking and non-English speaking backgrounds, at least nine in ten students improved their reading.

The above experience of The Smith Family, through programs such as *Learning for Life* and *student2student*, as well as its work in schools across Australia, informs the comments below relating to the context which we believe needs to be taken into account when reviewing the Australian curriculum.

Education as the key to Australia's economic and social prosperity

The key to Australia's economic and social prosperity is a well educated population. However, national and international data confirms that Australia faces significant human capital challenges, placing its international economic competitiveness and social cohesion at risk. This is particularly problematic given Australia's population is ageing, other nations are developing increasingly skilled workforces, and there is a clear short and long-term imperative to strengthen our economy. It is therefore critical that all young Australians are able to fully develop the skills needed to participate in the highly skilled workplaces of the twenty first century.

Educational data showing Australia's economic prosperity is at risk

Data highlighting the educational challenges facing Australia include:

- Australia's average reading score for Year 4 students is significantly lower than the average score for 21 other OECD countries, including England and the United States (COAG Reform Council, 2013).
- There is a 20 percent difference in the proportion of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds and those from high socio-economic backgrounds who attain Year 12 or equivalent (73.7% compared with 93.2%), and only 54 percent of Indigenous young Australians complete Year 12 or equivalent (COAG Reform Council, 2013).
- Two in five 17 to 24 year olds from low socio-economic backgrounds are not fully engaged in work or study (COAG Reform Council, 2013).

The Commonwealth's role in education

Given the critical role education plays in the wellbeing not only of individual Australians but the nation as a whole, The Smith Family considers the Commonwealth has a key role to play, in conjunction with the States and Territories, in both improving educational outcomes for all young people, and providing leadership to ensure disadvantaged children and young people are able to realise their full potential⁵. This role includes the development of a national curriculum which should aim to contribute to individual and national wellbeing, in both the short and longer term.

⁵ While constitutionally state and territory governments have responsibility for school education, there are a number of constitutional powers that enable the Commonwealth to enter the education arena and give it significant control. Section 96 for example provides that 'the Parliament may grant financial assistance to any State on such terms and conditions as the Parliament thinks fit' (Parliament of Australia Department of Parliamentary Services (2013) *Australian government funding for schools explained: 2013 update: Background note*).

The underpinnings of a national curriculum

The Smith Family is of the view that the Australian Curriculum should be underpinned by a broad vision for school education. We suggest that the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* provide direction for Australia's education system.

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;
- (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. As well as identifying the goal of equity and excellence for Australian schooling, the Declaration identified the goal that all young Australians be: successful learners; confident and creative individuals; and active and informed citizens. It also notes that 'improving educational outcomes for all young Australians will position young people to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives.' The Declaration identified 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'⁶.

⁶ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008

C.THE GOALS OF AUSTRALIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM



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Both the United Nations Convention and the Melbourne Declaration provide a broad and holistic perspective on the goal of education, both for individual children and young people and the nation as a whole, and this should inform the development of a national curriculum.

Excellence and equity

The development and implementation of the Australian curriculum should also work to promote excellence and equity. Currently, as identified earlier, Australian educational data highlights that children's educational outcomes vary considerably based on factors such as the socio-economic or cultural background of their parents/family. A national curriculum should aim to maximise the potential of all young people and minimize the relationship between their family background and the educational outcomes they achieve.

The contexts and circumstances of young people's lives

The Australian curriculum needs to be mindful of the context and circumstances of young people's lives. As Stehlik and Patterson⁷ have noted 'the life worlds and characteristics of young people in the twenty first century are significantly different in a range of respects, and in fact are continuing to evolve in response to societal, technological and economic developments. However, it is also clear that schooling systems and structures have not been able to keep up with these trends, and in general secondary school students for example are still cast in a twentieth century frame of reference that sees them as a homogenous group of adolescents without agency or voice, studying full time, living at home with supportive parents, not working and with no responsibilities other than being a student'.

The contexts and circumstances of young Australians lives are increasingly complex and diverse and The Smith Family has significant experience of the particular challenges facing children and young people from disadvantaged families. Fourteen percent of Australian children 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.

Access to technology

Access to technology is one clear example of where the underpinning assumptions of a national curriculum and how it is implemented, may not reflect the reality of many children and young people. The Smith Family's analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 2012 *Children's Participation Survey* showed that in Australia's most disadvantaged communities⁸, only 67.8% of children aged 5 to 14 years accessed the internet at home over a 12 month period. This compares with 90.5% of children in the most advantaged communities⁹. Other research by the ABS, shows that 85% of children in this age range who used the internet at home, did so for educational purposes. Curriculum, schools, teachers and educational systems now tend to assume that all children and young people have access to resources such as computers and the internet, but our analysis and experience working with disadvantaged families shows this is clearly not the case.

⁷ Stehlik T and Patterson J (eds) *Changing the paradigm: Education as the key to a socially inclusive future*, 2011, p. 159.

⁸ The bottom quintile of Australian communities using the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD)

⁹ The Smith Family (2013) *Sport, culture and the internet: Are Australian children participating?*

The Making a difference research

The *Making a Difference*¹⁰ 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, while perhaps not likely to be prescribed in a national curriculum, 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.

Many of these young people lived in communities where there were few educational and employment opportunities and they had limited access to the wider networks of people and resources which are known to be important for long term participation. This can make it very challenging for schools to offer the range of opportunities desirable under a national curriculum. It can also mean that young people have more limited opportunities to participate in career opportunities, quality work experience and other initiatives which can play a critical role in their post-school transition.

This research also highlighted, that while many of the young people had complex and diverse family circumstances, family was very important to most of them. Many of them took on caring roles within their families (both for siblings, parents and other family members) and participated in part-time employment. These young people expected schools to interact with their families in a very respectful and inclusive way and if this occurred they were more likely to stay engaged in education. Further where there was a strong and interesting curriculum that connected with these young people’s lives, they were more likely to stay engaged.

Conclusion

¹⁰ Skattebol J et al (2012) *Making a difference: Building on young people’s perspectives of economic adversity*

D.THE CONTEXTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S LIVES



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The above contextual factors highlight the significant challenges facing schools and education systems as they seek to maximise the potential of all young Australians. These are contextual factors that The Smith Family believes need to be taken into account when designing and implementing a national curriculum. Such a curriculum should reflect the important family, school and community factors which impact on young people’s educational participation. In its implementation it should also seek to support the deep cross-sectoral partnerships that are particularly important in improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged young people, as exemplified by school community hubs. Its implementation should also seek to build on opportunities offered by effective programs such as *student2student* which are positively impacting on children’s reading skills.

The Smith Family would be happy to expand on any of the issues raised in this submission.