



# The Smith Family

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## Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Review to inform a **Better and Fairer Education System** and the development of a new **National School Reform Agreement (NSRA)** offers a critical opportunity to make substantial progress on addressing the **long-standing systemic barriers** that result in **significant numbers** of young Australians **not achieving strong educational outcomes**.

The disproportionate and sustained impact of **COVID-19** on particular groups of young people, and the **rapid** and **ongoing** economic, social, environmental, technological and cultural **changes**, both at national and global levels, means that **high quality** and **equitable** school education, which develops **adaptable life-long learners**, is more important than ever.

Achieving such a school education will reap enormous **personal benefits** for young people as well as Australia as a whole. Conversely, failure to achieve the goal of high quality equitable school education will result in significant and likely **life-long negative** consequences for young people, as well as deep harm to **Australia's wellbeing** on all dimensions. Using an economic lens alone, research shows that each early school leaver conservatively costs the Australian community one million dollars over their lifetime (at 2014 net present value) (Lamb and Huo, 2017).

To achieve the goal of high quality equitable school education for all Australian students, the new NSRA needs to:

- Be grounded in the available and emerging **evidence** on how to **improve student outcomes**.
- Take a **human services system** perspective and put **young people** at the centre.
- Be **ambitious** about what can be achieved and **disciplined** in implementation, using **data** to track progress on student outcomes, particularly for young people in the **equity** groups.
- Promote and reward a **culture** of **collaborative learning, continuous improvement** and **public accountability**, across jurisdictions, systems and schools.

### Priority areas for the new NSRA

Given the size and entrenched nature of the challenge facing Australia's school system The Smith Family believes the new NSRA needs to have a number of focus areas, noting there are many **connections between these areas**, with progress in one contributing to progress in another.

These areas include:

- Putting **children and young people** at the **centre** and moving towards enabling educational systems to more effectively work with the **wider service systems** which impact children. This is essential given young people in the equity cohorts often live in families who **struggle to access** essential services including **health, community services, income support, NDIS** and **housing** and this **directly impacts** students' ability to achieve educationally.
- Supporting **parental engagement** in their child's learning.
- **Systemic support** for **fit for purpose school-community engagement** given it improves the relevance of learning and supports **student learning growth**.
- **High quality and appropriately sequenced careers support**.

- Improving **school attendance**, including through trialling and **evaluating innovations** given a diversity of responses are required.
- Strengthening **literacy, numeracy and digital skills** across all levels of schooling, with a particular focus on equity groups.
- A **data and evidence agenda** which enables much better and more regular tracking of progress on student outcomes, prioritising **equity groups**. This should include **publicly available longitudinal** data. Opportunities to **share data** and **learnings**, across jurisdictions, systems and sectors should be promoted and rewarded. The **Australian Education Research Organisation** has a key role to play in supporting the ongoing development of this data agenda and in generating, identifying and disseminating high quality evidence, focused on supporting **improved student outcomes**.
- An **independent assessor** authorised by the Education Council to review on an annual basis whether progress is being made by States/Territories on agreed educational outcome targets, including for equity groups. The role of the assessor should include contributing to the identification of **learnings** from across jurisdictions and recommendations for ongoing **continuous improvement**.
- **Public accountability mechanisms** that require systems and schools to demonstrate additional funds allocated on the base of need are being spent on students with additional needs, including within the context of ‘whole-of-school’ initiatives.

While this is a relatively long list of priority areas, parent engagement and school community engagement are directly related to other areas such as school attendance, wellbeing, literacy, numeracy and digital skills and careers support. A focus on parent and community engagement therefore will contribute both to **more significant** and **speedier student progress** in these critical areas.

Similarly, the data and evidence agenda, an independent assessor and increased public accountability will help drive **improvements** in **student outcomes**, identify where to **invest** and contribute to **greater community confidence** in Australia’s schooling system and what can be achieved for all young Australians.

In addition to the above areas of reform, **fully implementing** the **Schooling Resource Standard**, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged populations, is an **urgent complement** to targets and reforms in the new NSRA. The Smith Family warmly welcomes the Australian Government’s commitment to working with State and Territory Governments to achieve this. This implementation needs to occur at **speed** in schools **across Australia**. The state/territory in which a child lives should not determine when their school gets access to the full SRS.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this very important Review to inform a **Better and Fairer Education System** and a new **National School Reform Agreement (NSRA)**.

The Smith Family is a **national** charity working in over 90 low SES communities across every state and territory. We have been supporting children and families experiencing disadvantage for over 100 years. Our **vision** is a world where every child has the opportunity to change their future. Our **belief** is that education is one of the most powerful change agents and our **purpose** is to overcome **educational inequality** caused by poverty.

Our work focuses on Australian children in families and communities where we know it is harder for them to fully participate in their education without some help. Our approach is an **early intervention** one and provides long-term support to children and families who are likely to struggle without additional support. This includes children and families living in financial disadvantage and families and those living in communities experiencing disadvantage.

Our **Reconciliation Action Plan** articulates our commitment to achieving our vision for reconciliation, namely 'a nation where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children **fully benefit** from the **education and learning opportunities** this nation has to offer, and the broader Australian community truly values and shows deep respect for, and understanding of, the First Peoples of Australia'.

In FY22, over **190,000** children and young people, their parents/carers, and educators and community professionals, participated in our programs. Over **20,000** of these participants identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In FY22 over **60,000** children and young people experiencing disadvantage participated on our long-term educational scholarship program, **Learning for Life**. These students are evenly divided between **primary** and **secondary schools**, with a small proportion (3 percent) in tertiary education.

### Children on the *Learning for Life* program as context for the next NSRA

Data on the children and families on the *Learning for Life* program provides a sense of the range of **compounding challenges** that young people moving through Australia's schooling system may face, and is important **context** for the work of the Review:

- All *Learning for Life* students are living in a **low-income family**, as evidenced by having a Health Care or Pensioner Benefit Card.
- One in five students are of **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander** backgrounds.
- One in four students are from a **non-English speaking** background.
- More than one in three students and a similar proportion of their parents/carers have a **health** or **disability** issue.
- Three quarters of *Learning for Life* parents/carers are **not in the labour force** or are unemployed.
- Over half of parents/carers have **not completed Year 12** or equivalent.
- Over half of *Learning for Life* students live in a **single-parent** household and a further six percent live in **grandparent** or **other care** arrangements.
- One third of students live in a household of **six or more** people.
- Around a third of students live **outside metropolitan** cities.

- One in six *Learning for Life* families are **digitally excluded**<sup>1</sup>.

While this data shows families on the *Learning for Life* program are dealing with a **range of challenges**, many display **extraordinary resilience** and all parents/carers have entered into a Family Partnership Agreement with The Smith Family, articulating a **shared commitment** to supporting their child to achieve educationally. **Education matters** deeply to them because of what they **hope** and **believe** it can offer their children. This submission draws on our **practice** and **research experience** with these families over many years. It also reflects their **belief** in the **power** of high-quality equitable schooling, or as one *Learning for Life* parent recently articulated when we asked what she wanted her child to get out of school education, '**setting them up for life**'.

## CONTEXT FOR A NEW NSRA

There is ample and long-term evidence of the importance of educational achievement for **individuals** and **nations**. There is similar evidence that Australia's education system is not performing well for significant numbers of young people. Many young Australians are **missing key educational milestones** and **outcomes** as shown by data including, the Australian Early Development Census, school attendance data, NAPLAN, school completion rates and the rates of post-school engagement in work or study.

At an **aggregate level**, young people living in socioeconomic disadvantage, those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, those living with a disability and young people from regional, rural and remote locations, are more likely to encounter **systemic barriers** within the education system and broader human service system that contribute to them being **less likely to achieve** strong educational outcomes.

For many of these young people, challenges compound, such as for those living in socioeconomic disadvantage *and* living with a disability. Recent national and international challenges such as **COVID-19** and significant **cost-of-living** increases, have also **disproportionately impacted** many of these groups, affecting students' engagement in education, their educational outcomes and their wellbeing.

Analysis by the Grattan Institute (2016) of NAPLAN data, particularly highlights the impact of **systemic barriers** that some young people face:

For students with the **same level** of initial achievement in Year 3 (a proxy for similar capability), less progress is made by disadvantaged students, at disadvantaged schools, and in disadvantaged areas. This strongly suggests that **equally capable** students are **failing to reach their potential**. This holds for disadvantaged students at **all ability levels** in Year 3, especially bright students from poor backgrounds in disadvantaged schools (p.25).

In addition, **rapid and ongoing** economic, social, environmental, technological and cultural **changes**, both at national and global levels, means that high quality and equitable education, which develops **adaptable life-long learners**, is more important than ever, both for individual young people and Australia as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on the *Learning for Life* program is provided in the Appendix.

### Focus of this submission

The Expert Panel has identified five key areas of reform for Australian schools. Given the work of The Smith Family, the focus of our submission is on **Lifting student outcomes**, especially for students who have fallen behind or are at risk of doing so. We will also provide commentary on the reform areas of **Data collection** and **Transparency of and accountability for school funding**.<sup>2</sup> We note the **interconnections** between these three areas and indeed all five areas of reform and our commentary reflects this.

## PRIORITY AREA FOR REFORM: DRIVING IMPROVEMENTS IN STUDENT OUTCOMES

### A. Putting children and young people at the centre of the new NSRA

Efforts aimed at improving educational outcomes, particularly for students who are most at risk of falling behind, need to be cognisant of Bronfenbrenner's **ecological model** (1994), which articulates the **multiple influences** on children's development, namely:

- **Personal characteristics** - such as social skills, attitudes and intelligence.
- **Family** - such as the resources families can access and parental engagement in their child's learning.
- **Peers** – including their aspirations, attitudes to education and risk-taking behaviour.
- The **institutions** children and young people attend and engage with – including early learning and care services, schools, as well as health and community services.
- The **community** in which they live – including the social and economic resources available, the presence of role models and the level of community cohesion, safety and social capital.

There are links *between* these factors which also influence young people's outcomes, for example the relationship between family and school and how well institutions, such as schools and health services work together to support young people. These factors help **shape** a child's **likely pathway** or trajectory through life, however research shows that these pathways – and hence educational outcomes – are **not pre-determined** or immutable. Children's trajectories can be positively influenced by providing the **support that is needed** at the **time it is required**.

While the NSRA is a *schools* agreement, if the new Agreement is to achieve its goals of lifting student outcomes, it must put **children and young people at the centre** and move towards enabling educational systems to more effectively **work with the wider service systems** which impact children. Notwithstanding the various jurisdictional responsibilities, the goal over time must be for these service systems to work together to provide children and their families with support which is **timely, accessible** and **integrated**.

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<sup>2</sup> While cognisant of the importance of the two other areas identified by the Expert Panel - Improving student mental health and wellbeing and Attracting and retaining teachers – and their relationship to the other themes, they are less an area of expertise and focus for The Smith Family's work.



As highlighted by data on *Learning for Life* students, young people in the equity cohorts often live in families who **struggle to access** essential services including **health, community services, income support, NDIS and housing**. While these critical services sit **outside the education** system, barriers to accessing them **directly impact** students' ability to achieve educationally. If our human services system, including education, are not, over time, **re-designed** to put children and families at the centre, including with clearly articulated **shared accountabilities** across portfolios, it is **unlikely** that Australia will make **significant gains in educational equity**.

## B. Funding schools on the basis of need

The Smith Family is cognisant that school funding is not within the Terms of Reference of the Expert Panel and we **warmly welcome** the Australian Government's commitment to 'working with State and Territory Governments to get every school to **100 percent of its fair funding level**' (Hon Jason Clare, 29 March 2023).

How money is spent in education matters, but what resources are provided to schools, particularly to **government schools** which educate a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, also matters. Australia has not fully implemented the **Schooling Resource Standard (SRS)**<sup>3</sup> and this is contributing to increasing **social stratification** in our school system, with an even greater concentration of children experiencing disadvantage in **particular** and **under-resourced schools**. As identified by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and by a range of contemporary research (for example Greenwell and Bonnor, 2023), **student mix** has a key influence on educational outcomes and this concentration is exacerbating long-standing gaps in student achievement, despite the best efforts of school communities.

**Fully implementing the Schooling Resource Standard**, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged populations, is an **urgent complement** to targets and reforms that will be in the new NSRA. This implementation needs to occur in schools **across Australia**, and we note with concern that some states/territories are currently **many years away** from realising the public school funding target set under the needs based funding arrangements. The state/territory in which a child lives should not determine when their school gets access to the full SRS. How funds allocated under the NSRA are used and publicly accounted for will be addressed in the later sections of this submission on data and evidence and transparency and accountability.

## C. Parent and family engagement to support children's learning

Research and practice experience demonstrate the powerful impact of **parental and family engagement** on children's learning. Specific outcomes associated with parental engagement include:

- Improved **academic outcomes**, including academic performance, school attendance, school completion, graduation and enrolment in further education.
- Improved **behavioural, social and emotional outcomes** – including student attitudes and behaviour in school, ability to adapt and transition to school, social skills, self esteem and mental wellbeing (ARACY, 2016).

Particularly important for an equity agenda, parental engagement is a **stronger predictor** of children's **educational outcomes** than a **family's socioeconomic background** (Fox and Olsen, 2014). Students with engaged parents – no matter what their income or background – are more likely to do well at school, graduate from school and go on to higher education (ARACY,

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<sup>3</sup> As per the Gonski Review of School Funding and subsequent policy work.

2016). This research is constantly borne out in the **experience of The Smith Family** working with families experiencing disadvantage.

Despite this evidence, parental engagement **waxes and wanes** as an **educational policy priority** in Australia. In part this is because of a too rigid and artificial notion of “inside and outside” the school gate responsibilities, in part because good work in this space takes careful deliberative work over many years, and in part because what works and doesn’t work hasn’t been **systematically shared**. Given the evidence of the clear influence parents/carers have on children’s educational outcomes, parental engagement must be a **major policy focus** for a new NSRA.

In implementing this focus, as ARACY (2016) has noted, parental engagement is not a “one size fits all” and needs a “strong **policy framework**...(including) roles and responsibilities. A strong focus is also needed on identifying the **resources** and **professional development** requirements that will foster the embedding of parent engagement into educational policy and practice... For parent engagement to realise its full potential, the policy levers need to be **working in harmony** with the policy levers for education performance, physical wellbeing, social and emotional wellbeing and young people participating in issues affecting them” (p.36).

Policy implementation in this area should draw on and continue to build the evidence of how parental engagement in children’s learning can be supported, given the enormous benefits which ensue.

#### **D. Community engagement to support children’s learning particularly in the careers space**

In addition to the importance of parental/family engagement to children’s learning, the report of the second Gonski Review (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2018) found that “**Fit for purpose** school-community engagement undertaken to respond to identified student needs is an **effective way** to improve the relevance of learning, and to support personal development and **student learning growth**” (p. xv). This finding is directly relevant to the new NSRA’s goal of lifting student outcomes.

School-community engagement is **particularly important** in **schools serving students experiencing disadvantage**, to augment the **learning opportunities, resources** and **networks** that schools can draw on to support students. **School-industry collaborations**, often mediated through not-for-profit organisations, can play a key role in improving education and employment outcomes for young people experiencing disadvantage.

The second Gonski Review recommended the establishment of **mechanisms to facilitate quality partnerships** between schools, employers, members of the community, community organisations and tertiary institutions, to support **improved student outcomes** and engagement in learning. While good school-community engagement exists in pockets across Australia, it is **not systemically embedded** into the ways schools operate and there are limited mechanisms to facilitate quality partnerships. This should be a focus for the new NSRA.

Rather than being seen as an ‘extra’, such partnerships can contribute to the achievement of key student outcomes, including **student engagement** and **Year 12 or equivalent completion**. Done well, community engagement also has the potential to **reduce** some of the **workload burden** and stress of school leaders, particularly in the careers support space, as outlined below.



### E. High quality careers support and senior secondary pathways

The current NSRA called for and saw the completion of a Review of Senior Secondary Pathways. However, as the Productivity Commission (2022) has noted, this has not yet given rise to substantial national reforms.

Careers support is a critical area, particularly for young people experiencing disadvantage. **High quality and appropriately sequenced careers support** is a key contributor to both encouraging young people to **complete Year 12 or equivalent** and to them being in work, training or further study **post-school**.

Policy and practice experience confirm that careers support in schools is **patchy, inconsistent** and often **not aligned to a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy**, despite the efforts of school staff. It can be a particularly challenging area for schools working in disadvantaged communities. Research with around **1,700 young people experiencing disadvantage** in their first-year post-school shows that while most recall receiving some form of careers support while at school, only just over a **half found it helpful** support (The Smith Family, 2022).

This research identified the following **in-school recommendations** to support young people, with the ultimate goals of keeping them engaged in school, supporting Year 12 or equivalent completion and strengthening their post-school pathways:

- Access to more **comprehensive** and **personalised careers advice**, including in the middle years of school, and support to develop options for them to achieve their goals. This include information about labour markets, employment pathways, skills that will be in demand in the future and alternative pathways.
- Increased opportunities to study **VET subjects** at school, engage in **work experience** placements and be exposed to the **world of work** while at school.
- Greater exposure to **apprenticeships** and **traineeships** while at school and what to expect when a young person is the **first in their family** to participate in post-school study.
- Strategies that support **family members'** access to up-to-date labour market, education and training information and how they can support young people to develop their goals and plans to achieve them. This is important given family members are **key sources** of advice for young people, including those experiencing disadvantage.

**Declining Year 12 completion rates** and the rapidly changing labour market add weight to prioritising quality careers support in the new NSRA. As identified by the second Gonski Review, **partnerships** with community organisations and business are a critical vehicle for its delivery.

### F. A focus on school attendance

Research shows how important **high levels of attendance** are, particularly for **students experiencing disadvantage**. It strongly influences **achievement** in literacy and numeracy for example, and poor attendance heightens the risk of **early school leaving** (The Smith Family, 2018).

The trends in **declining school attendance** which are now evident in Australian schools' data across primary and secondary schools and systems, **pre-dated COVID** and are deeply disturbing. The average attendance rate in Years 7 to 10 Government schools in 2022 for example was 82.7 percent, meaning that on average these students missed close to **seven weeks** of school in that year. Attendance has not, until very recently, received the national focus that it needs. Improving school attendance must be a **major policy focus** of the new NSRA, including clear targets for equity groups. Tracking this will require a stronger **data regime**.

The Smith Family believes a policy focus on attendance must avoid highly **punitive approaches** which are **ineffective** and often **counter-productive**. This is a policy area where a **diversity of approaches** will be required and where there is a role for **innovations** which have a strong **evaluation** component. Ensuring a **culture of learning** develops across schools, systems and jurisdictions is critical in this area, with existing and **emerging evidence** – on what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and importantly on what doesn't work – being shared across jurisdictions and publicly, so that students benefit.

A number of the themes identified earlier in this submission can **positively contribute to improved attendance**, including integrated service support, parental engagement, community engagement and high-quality careers support.

### G. A focus on literacy, numeracy and digital skills

**Literacy and numeracy skills** remain **critical** for all young people and there is considerable evidence of the **long-term gap** in performance in these areas for young Australians in the equity groups. These skills must remain a priority policy area and targets set for them in the new NSRA. Such targets should aim to improve achievement for all students, particularly those in the **equity groups**.

International evidence shows the potential of **small group tutoring** to improve school students' literacy and numeracy, though there is **less publicly available evidence** to date of the **impact** of significant **Australian policy** efforts in this area. As noted in relation to innovations focused on strengthening school attendance, emerging evidence – on what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and on what *doesn't* work – should be **shared** across jurisdictions and publicly, so that students benefit. Such evidence is important for informing the role tutoring might play as part of the new NSRA. As outlined below in the data section, The Smith Family believes the **Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)** has a critical role to play in generating, identifying and disseminating high quality evidence, including in the area of tutoring, focused on supporting improved student outcomes.

There is also international and Australian evidence of the value of **highly targeted in-home tutoring** support for students who are struggling with literacy and numeracy. For example, published evaluations of The Smith Family's *Catch-Up Learning* program, which targets *Learning for Life* students in Years 4 to 8 who are struggling in literacy and numeracy, demonstrate:

- High **program completion** and **program attendance** (83 percent and 86 percent respectively).
- **Two in three** students made **greater progress** in numeracy than might typically be expected over a six month period and **more than half** of the students made greater progress than expected in literacy. Forty four percent of students made greater than expected progress in both.
- Students increased their **confidence, commitment to** and **love of learning** and developed some of the **foundations of learning** that contribute to longer-term educational success (The Smith Family, 2022).

Given the very significant and long-standing literacy and numeracy under-achievement of many students, particularly those from equity groups, consideration should, in the first instance, be given to supporting **multiple models of tutoring support**, including in-home, if there is **evidence** of effectiveness. This approach can contribute to **accelerating** progress in this space, alongside of efforts, for example, to strengthen teacher pedagogy.

**Digital skills** have also become an **essential pre-requisite** for participation in school education and post-school participation in education, work and Australian society, with access to appropriate digital resources an essential pre-requisite to acquiring such skills.

The OECD (2023) has identified the importance of enabling all young people to participate in an increasingly **digitalised world**, including equipping them with **digital** and problem-solving skills for the digital environment and empowering them to **engage safely**, healthily and responsibly in the digital environment.

Enhancing the digital skills of Australian students should be a **priority** for the **new NSRA**, as well as the setting of targets to measure progress in this area. Australia currently has **no up-to-date assessment** of students' digital skills, with the last NAPLAN assessment in this space undertaken in 2018. A great deal has changed in the digital space since then. That assessment highlighted **similar gaps in digital skills**, based on **student background**, that literacy and numeracy assessments show. A lack of digital skills can **compound** gaps in other key skills areas, such as literacy and numeracy.

## **PRIORITY AREA FOR REFORM: DATA COLLECTION AND CONTINUING TO BUILD THE NATIONAL EDUCATION EVIDENCE BASE**

Achieving the overall goal of lifting student outcomes under a new NSRA will require **new and more nuanced** data collection as well as continued efforts to build the Australian educational **evidence base**. One of the achievements of the current NSRA has been the establishment of the **Australian Education Research Organisation**. Continuing to enhance its work and impact should remain an important priority of the new NSRA. The Smith Family believes AERO has a particularly urgent role to play in helping to address the significant and long-standing learning gaps experienced by **equity cohorts**.

A **data agenda** which enables much better and more regular tracking of progress on student outcomes, prioritising **equity groups**, must be an essential feature of the new NSRA. Outcomes for equity groups must be monitored and **publicly reported on**. Currently there is little meaningful visibility for example, of low SES students' school completion rates. Australia's understanding of the educational outcomes of students with a disability is limited, and we have little understanding of how, for example, Aboriginal boys and Aboriginal girls' outcomes compare.

Much more **nuanced, longitudinal data**, which is made **publicly available**, is critical to both **understanding progress** and to more effectively **target investment** support. In making such data publicly available the Commonwealth and States/Territories, and the systems within them, must focus on creating a **culture** that prioritises **continuous improvement** and **sharing learnings**, rather than a 'league table' mentality which is ultimately in no-one's best interests, particularly students. Developing this culture and contributing publicly to its development will require significant **leadership** from all jurisdictions and systems and is essential if the shared goal of educational equity is to be achieved.

The very long-awaited **Unique Student Identifier (USI)** is an essential component of an enhanced data agenda and once implemented, efforts should be made to maximise its value, including potentially **linking** it with similar initiatives, such as the tertiary USI and ideally data in the early years. All students on the *Learning for Life* program have a USI which enables The Smith Family to track their educational outcomes (including attendance and school completion),

regardless of their mobility across jurisdictions. It has also enabled us to contribute to the Australian educational evidence base (see for eg The Smith Family, 2018).

There are also significant opportunities for better use of data to support improved student outcomes, including the **sharing of data** between agencies, including non-government organisations. This should be encouraged and supported by policy arrangements relating to schools. The Smith Family has entered into data sharing agreements with the South Australian and Queensland Departments of Education. These agreements are based on a **shared purpose** around using data to **support improved outcomes** for **children experiencing disadvantage**, one of the key goals of the new NSRA.

Since late 2021, the South Australian data exchange agreement has provided The Smith Family's front-line staff with **real-time** access, through a purpose-built Power BI dashboard, to key educational data that the Department for Education holds on *Learning for Life* students. The dashboard is hosted by the Department and available data includes school **attendance**, achievement in **literacy** and **numeracy**, behaviour management issues, demographic data, including mobility, as well as school data. Data is visually displayed to maximise its **usefulness** to team members.

The SA dashboard is now in its second year of implementation and team members describe it as a '**game changer**' in their work with students and families, enabling them to provide more **targeted** and **timely support**, particularly when students are struggling. Team members are using the data frequently and in a diverse range of ways including:

- Working with families whose children are **struggling to attend school** consistently and/or have a number of behaviour management issues.
- Offering students **struggling with literacy or numeracy** additional programmatic support.
- Early identification of secondary students who are struggling to stay engaged and are **at risk of early school leaving**.
- Celebrating **educational successes** with families.
- Guiding conversations with families of students at **key transition points**.
- Re-engaging with families who have **moved home and/or school**.
- Enhancing understanding of students' **complex schooling histories**.

The initial data exchange pilot with South Australia has clearly demonstrated the power of such data sharing arrangements around a shared purpose of improving student outcomes. It has also shown that such arrangements are legally and technically possible, with due attention to privacy and data security requirements. Importantly, the pilot has shown the **very strong support** of *Learning for Life* parent/carers for such arrangements, with **95 percent** of parent/carers in SA consenting to participate in these data sharing arrangements. The giving of this consent has been founded on parent/families' understanding that The Smith Family staff will use this data to better **support their child**.

## **PRIORITY AREA FOR REFORM: TRANSPARENCY OF AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF SCHOOL FUNDING**

The Productivity Commission's review of the current NSRA highlights the importance of this key area of reform for the new Agreement. The Commission concluded that "the NSRA is a sound platform for intergovernmental collaboration", yet "the **NSRA's initiatives have done little**, so far, to **improve outcomes**" (Productivity Commission, 2022 p.2) This is despite the fact that the current Agreement includes national measures in academic achievement, school attendance and school completion, including for equity groups, that should be included in the new NSRA.

The Productivity Commission's 2023 draft report on the *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap* provides both a deeply concerning assessment of progress in this critical area of Australian public policy and sheds some light on considerations for **accountability mechanisms** in the **new NSRA**. The Commission notes: "Progress in implementing the (Closing the Gap) Agreement's Priority Reforms has, for the most part, been **weak** and reflects a business-as-usual approach to implementing policies and programs that affect the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Current implementation raises questions about whether governments have fully grasped the **scale of change** required to their **systems, operations** and **ways of working** to deliver the unprecedented shift they have committed to" (Productivity Commission, 2023 p.2). The Smith Family would argue that given the long-standing and deepening educational inequity in Australia, the scale of change required in Australian schools is also substantial.

The Productivity Commission also notes regarding the Closing the Gap Agreement that "although there are pockets of good practice, overall progress against the Priority Reforms has been slow, uncoordinated and piecemeal...Actions often focus on the 'what' with little, if any, detail on the 'how' or the 'why'. There is for the most part, **no strategic approach** that explains (and provides evidence for) how the initiatives that governments have identified will achieve the **fundamental transformation** envisaged in the Agreement. This makes it near impossible...to hold governments to account" (Productivity Commission, 2023 p. 3).

The limited progress made under the current NSRA and the Closing the Gap Agreement raises the key question of **what needs to be built into the new NSRA**, associated bilateral Agreements and accountability mechanisms, to ensure its objective of lifting student outcomes, particularly for equity groups, is achieved.

The Productivity Commission (2022) recommended that the new NSRA should include "firm targets for improving achievement for all students, including students from priority equity groups, in each jurisdiction...The basis of each new target should be common to all jurisdictions, however, there should be scope for the Commonwealth and each jurisdiction to negotiate the level of the target" (p.2). The Smith Family broadly supports this approach, with the proviso that such targets and the rationale for the level of them be **publicly available**.

The Productivity Commission also noted that "**bilateral agreements** will need to be more of a focal point for jurisdictions to advance reforms, and **annual performance reporting** will need to be improved" (p.2). The Smith Family also supports this recommendation.

As identified earlier in the section on data, both more nuanced longitudinal data collection and public reporting within a **culture of continuous improvement**, must be foundations for the new agreement. The Smith Family proposes that to support this intent, an **independent assessor** (for example, the Productivity Commission, ACARA, AERO etc) be authorised by the Education Council to **review** on an **annual basis** whether **progress** is being made by States/Territories on agreed educational outcome targets, including for equity groups. The role of the assessor should



include contributing to the identification of **learnings** from across jurisdictions and **recommendations** for ongoing continuous improvement. The work of respective state Auditor Generals, whose role includes ensuring entities are **transparent** to their respective Parliaments and communities, offer some insights on the role of an independent assessor under the NSRA.

The needs based school funding model sees additional funding going to schools based on their number of students for example from low SES, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds or with a disability. The underlying assumption should be that **these funds are allocated** or ring-fenced to provide evidence informed support to **those students with additional needs**, including within the context of 'whole-of-school' initiatives. These funds should not be seen simply as 'business as usual' funds but rather must be used to contribute to improved student outcomes as part of an **equity agenda**. The new agreement should have **public accountability mechanisms** built in, with systems and schools needing to demonstrate funds are used in this way.

## CONCLUSION

This Review offers a critical opportunity to make substantial progress on addressing the **long-standing systemic barriers** that result in **significant numbers** of young Australians **not achieving strong educational outcomes**.

The disproportionate and sustained impact of **COVID-19** on particular groups of young people, and the **rapid** and **ongoing** economic, social, environmental, technological and cultural **changes**, both at national and global levels, means that **high quality** and **equitable** school education, which develops **adaptable life-long learners**, is more important than ever.

Achieving such a school education will reap enormous **personal benefits** for young people as well as Australia as a whole. Conversely, failure to achieve the goal of high quality equitable school education will result in significant and likely **life-long negative** consequences for young people, as well as deep harm to **Australia's wellbeing** on all dimensions.

To achieve the goal of high quality equitable school education for **all Australian students**, the new NSRA needs to:

- Be grounded in the available and emerging **evidence** on how to **improve student outcomes**.
- Take a **human services system** perspective and put **young people** at the centre.
- Be **ambitious** about what can be achieved and **disciplined** in implementation, using **data** to track progress on student outcomes, particularly for young people in the **equity** groups.
- Promote and reward a **culture** of **collaborative learning**, **continuous improvement** and **public accountability**, across jurisdictions, systems and schools.

### Priority areas for the new NSRA

Given the size and entrenched nature of the challenge facing Australia's school system The Smith Family believes the new NSRA needs to have a number of focus areas, noting there are many **connections** between these areas, with progress in one contributing to progress in another.

These areas include:



- Putting **children and young people** at the **centre** and moving towards enabling educational systems to more effectively work with the **wider service systems** which impact children. This is essential given young people in the equity cohorts often live in families who **struggle to access** essential services including **health, community services, income support, NDIS** and **housing** and this **directly impacts** students' ability to achieve educationally.
- Supporting **parental engagement** in their child's learning.
- **Systemic support for fit for purpose school-community engagement** given it improves the relevance of learning and supports **student learning growth**.
- **High quality and appropriately sequenced careers support**.
- Improving **school attendance**, including through trialling and **evaluating innovations**, given a diversity of responses are required.
- Strengthening **literacy, numeracy** and **digital skills** across all levels of schooling with a particular focus on equity groups.
- A **data and evidence agenda** which enables better and more regular tracking of progress on student outcomes, prioritising **equity groups**. This should include **publicly available** data and **longitudinal** data. Opportunities to **share data** and **learnings**, across jurisdictions, systems and sectors should be promoted and **rewarded**. The **Australian Education Research Organisation** has a key role to play in supporting the ongoing development of this data agenda and in generating, identifying and disseminating high quality evidence, focused on supporting improved student outcomes.
- An **independent assessor** authorised by the Education Council to **review** on an **annual** basis whether **progress** is being made by States/Territories on agreed educational outcome targets, including for equity groups. The role of the assessor should include contributing to the identification of **learnings** from across jurisdictions and recommendations for ongoing **continuous improvement**.
- **Public accountability mechanisms** that require systems and schools to demonstrate additional funds allocated on the base of need are being spent on students with additional needs, including within the context of 'whole-of-school' initiatives.

While this is a relatively long list of priority areas, parent engagement and school community engagement are directly related to other areas such as school attendance, wellbeing, literacy, numeracy and digital skills and careers support. A focus on parent and community engagement will contribute both to more **significant** and **speedier student progress** in these critical areas.

Similarly, the data and evidence agenda, an independent assessor and public accountability will help drive **improvements** in student **outcomes**, identify **where to invest** and contribute to greater **community confidence** in Australia's schooling system and what can be achieved for all young Australians.

In addition to the above areas of reform, **fully implementing the Schooling Resource Standard**, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged populations, is an **urgent complement** to targets and reforms in the new NSRA. The Smith Family **warmly welcomes** the Australian Government's commitment to working with State and Territory Governments to achieve this. This implementation needs to occur at **speed** in schools **across Australia**. The state/territory in which a child lives should not determine when their school gets access to the full SRS.

The Smith Family appreciates the opportunity to contribute this submission to the important work of the Review and would be happy to expand on it to the Panel if this would be of use.

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## Appendix

### *The Learning for Life program*

*Learning for Life* is an early intervention scholarship program offering long-term support for children and young people experiencing disadvantage to **succeed at school**, complete **Year 12 or equivalent**, and go on to **work or further studies**. Students can begin on the program in the **first year of school** and stay on it through **primary** and **secondary school** and potentially **tertiary** education.

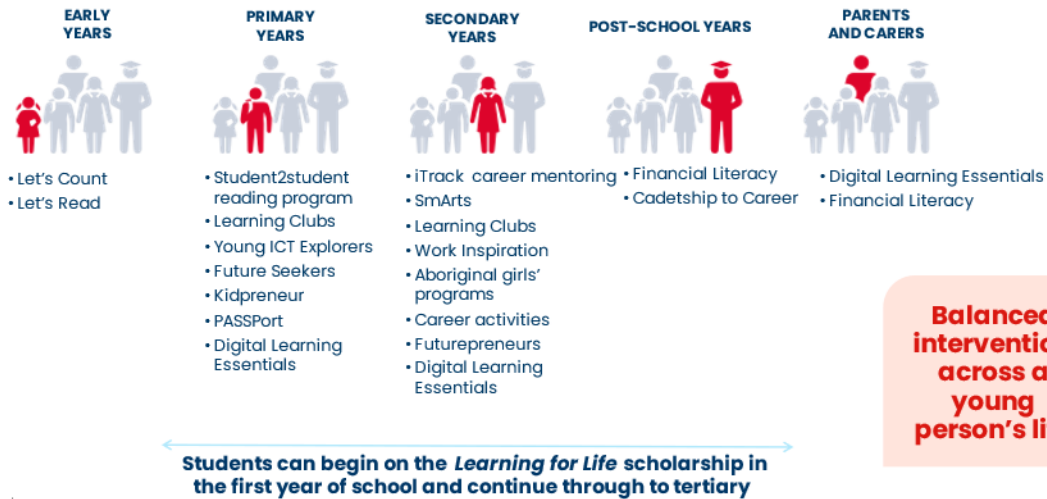
*Learning for Life* provides families and scholarship students with:

- A **modest biannual payment** to help them cover core education-related expenses such as books, uniforms and excursions.
- Support from a ***Learning for Life* Family Partnership Coordinator** (a Smith Family team member) who works with the family to support their child's long-term participation in education.
- Access to a **range of programs** to help ensure children's engagement in education. These include literacy and numeracy programs, learning clubs, mentoring and career programs and digital and financial literacy programs for parents/carers (see *Key programs* figure below).

**Supporting parents/carers** to engage in their child's education is a foundation of *Learning for Life*. Parent/Carers enter into a formal **Family Partnership Agreement** with The Smith Family which articulates a **shared commitment** to supporting a student's long-term participation in education. A key role of The Smith Family's Family Partnership Coordinators is to support parents'/carers' engagement with their child's learning, including strengthening the **home-school interface**. Team members' work with families is guided and supported by a **Family Practice Framework**, associated resources and ongoing training.

Students are recruited to *Learning for Life* through the over 700 low ICSEA schools that The Smith Family has partnerships with. Each *Learning for Life* student has a **Unique Student Identifier**, enabling us to longitudinally track their **school attendance**, **achievement in literacy and numeracy**, school **completion** and post-school engagement in **work or further study** (see *Measures of effectiveness* below).

## Key Programs at Different Life Stages



**Balanced intervention across a young person's life**

## Measures of effectiveness

