

Submission:

House Standing Committee on Education: Inquiry into the Factors Driving Educational Attainment

June 2026

Executive summary

This submission to the House Standing Committee on Education draws on evidence from The Smith Family's research and practice experience supporting children and young people experiencing disadvantage across Australia. It focusses on the factors shaping Year 12 attainment and post-school engagement, with particular attention to the causes and consequences of early school leaving.

This submission is primarily informed by findings from The Smith Family's longitudinal Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study, which follows cohorts of young people from senior secondary into the early post-school years. The research highlights that educational attainment is shaped by the cumulative effects of engagement, opportunity, support, wellbeing, and system responsiveness across a young person's educational journey.

Research shows there are multiple pathways into early school leaving. While the demographic characteristics of interest to this Committee are clear correlates of early school leaving, more immediate indicators within education systems provide stronger insights into risk. Lower school attendance, academic disengagement, poor achievement, bullying, exclusion, health and mental health challenges, and instability in young people's personal circumstances are closer drivers of early school leaving and subsequent attainment outcomes.

The PET research also demonstrates that early school leaving does not always follow a long period of disengagement. Many young people who ultimately leave school early had previously intended to complete Year 12, but experienced unexpected events or changes in circumstances that altered their pathways. These findings point to the importance of timely identification, flexible responses, and sustained supports during periods of heightened vulnerability.

Importantly, the PET research also identifies factors that support young people to achieve their school and post-school goals. These include strong relationships with trusted adults, culturally safe and inclusive environments, flexible and strengths-based learning pathways, coordinated transition support, access to wellbeing and practical supports, and sustained engagement beyond school completion.

This submission argues that improving educational attainment requires approaches that strengthen engagement and participation throughout the education journey, while responding to the broader social and structural barriers affecting young people's capacity to remain connected to education.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen early identification and timely response to disengagement risk to prevent early school leaving
2. Invest in flexible, personalised, strengths-based supports that respond to changing student circumstances
3. Improve continuity of support across school and post-school transitions
4. Strengthen holistic, relational and culturally safe supports for young people experiencing disadvantage
5. Improve national data consistency and longitudinal linkage
6. Expand national measures of attainment and transition success

The Smith Family welcomes any further discussion regarding the PET study or any other aspects of this submission.

Suzie Riddell

Head of Evidence and Impact, The Smith Family

The Smith Family is Australia's largest educational charity

The Smith Family is a national charity dedicated to supporting Australian children and families experiencing disadvantage, with a vision for every child to have the opportunity to change their future. The Smith Family believes that education is one of the most powerful change agents. Our focus is on helping young Australians to overcome educational inequality caused by poverty. As a national, independent charity, every day we work with children and their families to help them unlock better futures.

Today we support almost 72,000 students across Australia through our holistic flagship program, *Learning for Life*. This wrap-around program helps break the cycle of disadvantage through targeted, long-term educational support for students as they progress on their school journey. *Learning for Life* students are all in low-income families, with many facing multiple barriers to engage in education. One-quarter (26%) identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, 40% have a health or disability issue, 23% have a parent/carer from a non-English speaking background, and half (50%) have a parent/carer who has not completed Year 12.

Other programs at The Smith Family include pre-school focused reading and numeracy training for educators, financial management for families and tertiary students and support for digital inclusion through provision of devices and data to students. Further, the Smith Family is expanding our careers education programs, providing even more opportunities to help students transition from school into tertiary education, training and into the workforce.

Our programs across Australia aim to achieve outcomes aligned with Commonwealth and State/Territory priorities related to educational attainment including school attendance, school completion and post-school engagement in employment and further study.

Robust, in-depth research and evidence-based practice underpins our work

The Smith Family's programs are developed and implemented based on evidence. All programs – including *Learning for Life* – are underpinned by a Theory of Change and Program Logic and our Evidence and Impact group leads policy, research, and analytic work to evaluate program impacts. This work drives continuous improvement in our practice and program delivery, ensuring that we develop and deliver programs that are innovative, responsive, and relevant for the students and families that we support. Our publications also contribute to the broader evidence supporting improvements in educational outcomes.

The Smith Family has a strong focus on and internal capability to measure the outcomes of the children and young people supported on our programs. Each *Learning for Life* student has a Unique Student Identifier, enabling us to longitudinally track their school attendance, achievement, school completion, and post-school engagement in employment, education, and training.

About the Pathways, Engagement and Transitions study

A key part of our research is based on the **Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET)** project. PET is a longitudinal study that will run for seven years (2021-2027), exploring the pathways young people take through the latter years of school and the early years post-school, and the factors influencing those pathways. The PET project has followed three different cohorts of young people who were *Learning for Life* students:

- The Year 12 (2020) cohort, tracking young people over the first three years post school (2021-2023)
- The Year 10 (2020) cohort, tracking young people for six years across senior secondary and post-school (2021-2026)

- The Year 10 (2023) cohort, tracking young people for four years across senior secondary and post-school (2024-2027).

This design has enabled The Smith Family to address multiple questions about the experiences of young people experiencing disadvantage, and their pathways through school completion and post-school attainment, and how these pathways may be changing over time. This research underpins the majority of the comments provided throughout this submission, and consequently our focus in this submission is on Year 12 attainment and post-school qualifications.

Research focus: The causes and consequences of early school leaving

Early school leaving is associated with lower post-school engagement and a higher likelihood of entering lower-skilled work. As a result, young people who leave school before completing Year 12 are more exposed to unemployment and job insecurity and often face a more difficult transition into the labour market. The initial post-school transition is a particularly critical period for establishing positive post-school pathways, with our research showing that young people who are not engaged in education, employment or training in their first-year post-school are more likely to remain disengaged two years later (The Smith Family, 2025).

International evidence also suggests that leaving school early can have long-lasting impacts on health and social outcomes, with effects differing by gender and by the age at which young people leave school (Moschion & van Ours, 2025). Moschion and van Ours find that for men, early school leaving is associated with a higher probability of experiencing homelessness, incarceration, and drug use several years after leaving school. For women, the effects are more concentrated in the short term, particularly for those who leave very early. Their findings also indicate that the age of leaving matters, with the largest effects observed when students leave at ages 14-15 compared with leaving at 16-17 years of age.

In recent years, the Apparent Year 10-12 Retention Rate for Australian students has shown that approximately one-in-five young people are not completing Year 12 (ACARA, 2026). For students in more disadvantaged schools, this figure is closer to one-in-three (forthcoming research from The Smith Family).

Given this backdrop of school completion for young people experiencing disadvantage and the ongoing impacts of early school leaving, understanding the factors and pathways into early school leaving, and what would help young people to remain at school until Year 12 completion and successfully transition into further work, study, or training, is a core focus of the PET study, and our main learnings from this work are captured below.

While the PET research demonstrates the complexity of pathways into early school leaving, it also identifies a range of protective factors and supports that strengthen educational engagement, attainment, and successful post-school transitions.

Why young people leave school early

Our research, in conjunction with other academic and grey literature, has identified that there are multiple pathways to early school leaving. Students with particular demographic characteristics are at greater risk for leaving school without completing Year 12 (characteristics that are often the focus of policy attention), however, there are more proximal drivers beyond these characteristics that are more directly related to early school leaving. These factors may build over time, with a 'long run' into disengagement, but young people can also experience sudden and unexpected events that, without appropriate support, can upend their plans.

1. Proximal factors matter more than demographic characteristics for identifying and understanding risk of disengagement or early school leaving

Research has consistently identified that a range of demographic factors are linked with various attainment outcomes. For example, young males, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people, those living with a health or mental health condition, or those living in a regional area, are less likely to complete Year 12 or to pursue post-school study.

However, our research also highlights that other data points or early indicators – readily accessible within education systems – are better at distinguishing which young people are most at risk of leaving school early. Students who are struggling academically (e.g. D or E English and Maths grades) or those with lower school attendance in Year 9 have elevated risk of early school leaving (The Smith Family, 2023). These proximal indicators are more closely linked to students' day-to-day educational experiences and provide stronger insight into risk than demographic characteristics alone.

Beyond these educational indicators, other proximal factors or 'reasons' for early school leaving provide better insights about where policy attention is required. Young people describe a range of reasons for leaving school, which can be considered as "push" and "pull" factors that affect their pathways. Pull factors are typically about being drawn to external contexts, for example, a preference to work, build skills, and/or pursue an apprenticeship or traineeship. Push factors are those that make school an undesirable place to be and include disliking school, experiencing health or mental health challenges affecting engagement, struggling academically, frequent absences, bullying, and conflict with students and/or teachers. Our qualitative PET data also highlights a number of young people whose school asked them to leave (The Smith Family, 2023).

2. Disengagement is not always a long process

Early school leaving is frequently framed as the end point of a long process of disengagement and academic failure. While this describes the experience of many early school leavers, there are multiple pathways to early school leaving (e.g. the push and pull factors described above) and the divergence of those pathways can occur across a student's school career. For some young people, early school leaving is precipitated by specific 'shocks' or turning points that can intersect with existing disadvantage. Students experiencing disadvantage are more likely to experience these shocks and have fewer resources to manage or mitigate them, increasing the risk that temporary disruption becomes sustained disengagement (Dupere, 2015).

Our longitudinal research supports the notion that **unexpected events or changes** can influence whether or not a student completes Year 12. The PET survey asked young people while they were in Year 11 if they *intended* to complete Year 12 the following year. Almost all (99%) of those who **subsequently left school** before the end of Year 12 had said they intended to complete Year 12. The surrounding contexts varied – some felt that Year 12 was not offering them opportunities to learn beneficial life skills, others struggled with unexpected health or mental health conditions that made staying to the end of Year 12 unfeasible.

These findings demonstrate that early school leaving is shaped by interacting individual, relational, and structural factors operating across young people's lives, including their personal circumstances, relationships, school environments, and broader social conditions (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2019). These complexities also emerge clearly in a series of case studies we published (The Smith Family, 2024), where young adults described their senior-secondary and post-school pathways through the COVID-19 years. While all young people had experienced disadvantage, they experienced very different pathways and post-school outcomes, often reflecting how the micro, meso, and macro factors affected their experiences.

3. The factors linked with Year 12 attainment are the same factors affecting post-school engagement in work, study and training.

Broadly, those who are 'pulled' to leave school tend to have better post-school outcomes than those who felt pushed out by other factors. For young people 'pushed' from school for reasons like academic underachievement, disability, health and/or mental health conditions, and the impacts that living in poverty can have on personal stability, these are also the same factors that affect their capacity to identify and enrol in study post-school (typically vocational education and training), or to seek, obtain and maintain employment (The Smith Family 2023, 2024).

What helps young people to achieve their school and post-school attainment goals

The qualitative interviews with young people through the PET study have focussed on what has—or would have—helped them to remain at school and transition to their desired post-school pathways. The evidence from this research highlights that educational attainment is strengthened when young people experience sustained engagement, relational support, and confidence that education will lead to meaningful future opportunities. Young people are more likely to remain engaged in school and successfully transition into further education, training, or employment when they feel known, supported, and capable within their learning environments.

A consistent finding across the research is that attainment is rarely driven by academic factors alone. Rather, educational participation and completion are influenced by a combination of wellbeing, stability, positive relationships, cultural safety, aspirations, and practical access to opportunities. Young people who reported strong connections with trusted adults, including teachers, youth workers, mentors, family members, and community members, were more likely to persist through periods of challenge and uncertainty.

Belonging, relevance, and engagement

The research also highlights the importance of belonging and relevance. Young people are more likely to engage in education when they can see clear connections between learning and their future goals, identities, and interests. Flexible and strengths-based learning environments can be particularly important for students who have previously experienced disengagement, poor attendance, exclusion, or disrupted schooling. Approaches that recognise and build on young people's capabilities, rather than reframing them through deficits or risk, appear to support stronger educational engagement and confidence.

Supporting successful transitions

Importantly, successful attainment pathways are often characterised by continuity of support during periods of transition. Transition points, particularly from middle to senior secondary, and from school into employment, VET, apprenticeships, or higher education, can create heightened risk of disengagement. Young people benefit from coordinated transition planning, individualised guidance, exposure to post-school pathways, and sustained follow-up support beyond school completion (Austin et al, 2022; Bennett et al, 2022).

Addressing barriers beyond the classroom

The findings indicate that barriers beyond the school environment substantially affect educational participation and continuity. Housing instability, caring responsibilities, mental health challenges, financial stress, transport barriers, and family instability can significantly affect a young person's capacity to engage consistently in education. Educational attainment is therefore strengthened when schools and services adopt holistic and collaborative approaches that respond to the broader circumstances shaping young people's lives.

Cultural safety and inclusion

For Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people, culturally safe and affirming environments are particularly important. Programs and educational settings that value cultural identity, community connection, and local leadership appear to strengthen both engagement and educational confidence (Peacock & Guerzoni, 2022; Prehn et al., 2024). More broadly, students are more likely to achieve positive attainment outcomes when they feel respected, included, and represented within educational systems.

Creating the conditions for attainment

The research suggests that effective responses focus not only on preventing early school leaving, but on actively creating the conditions that enable young people to participate, progress, and succeed over time. These include:

- Strong relationships and trusted adult support
- Culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments
- Flexible pathways and multiple definitions of success
- Early identification and support for disengagement
- Coordinated transition planning and navigational support
- Integration of wellbeing and educational supports
- Sustained post-school engagement assistance

Educational attainment reflects the cumulative effects of engagement, opportunity, support, and system responsiveness across a young person's educational journey. Policies that strengthen these conditions are likely to improve not only Year 12 completion, but also longer-term participation in education, employment, and training.

Improving data systems to understand pathways to educational attainment

Current national education datasets provide valuable insight into participation and attainment patterns, including through measures such as Apparent Retention Rates, Year 12 Certification Rates, and post-school engagement and destinations data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Jobs and Skills Australia. However, these measures also have important limitations when used to understand the pathways young people take through education and into employment, further study, and training.

A consistent challenge across jurisdictions is that existing measures often capture single points in time, rather than the continuity, disruption, re-engagement and non-linear pathways that characterise many young people's educational experiences, particularly for students experiencing disadvantage.

Limitations of current measures

Measures such as the Apparent Retention Rate are useful system-level indicators, but they cannot distinguish between different student pathways or whether students have completed Year 12. For example, these measures may count students as having left school even where they have:

- Transferred between sectors or jurisdictions
- Moved into alternative or flexible learning settings
- Commenced vocational education or training
- Returned to school after a period of absence
- Experienced interrupted or non-continuous participation.

Similarly, Year 12 certification measures differ across states and territories in terms of definitions, requirements, and reporting practices, making direct comparison difficult. Existing datasets also provide limited visibility of:

- Partial completion and incremental attainment
- Transitions between school and VET pathways
- Re-engagement following periods of disengagement
- The quality and stability of post-school outcomes
- Student experiences of belonging, wellbeing, and engagement.

As a result, current data collections can understate the complexity of educational pathways and provide only partial insight into the factors shaping attainment outcomes.

Improving national consistency and linkage

There is an opportunity to strengthen the national evidence base through greater consistency and integration across education datasets and jurisdictions. Potential improvements include:

- Nationally consistent definitions of school completion, participation, and post-school engagement
- Improved tracking of individual movements between schools, sectors, flexible learning settings, and VET pathways
- Longitudinal linkage between school, VET, higher education, and employment datasets
- Stronger integration of attendance, achievement, engagement, and wellbeing indicators
- Greater use of Unique Student Identifiers and linked administrative datasets to understand longer-term pathways.

Improved linkage would support a clearer understanding of how young people move through education systems over time, including the pathways associated with successful re-engagement and recovery following periods of disengagement.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The evidence from The Smith Family and other research indicates that educational attainment pathways are shaped by the cumulative effects of engagement, wellbeing, relationships, opportunity, and broader social conditions across a young person's educational journey. Improving educational attainment outcomes, particularly for young people experiencing disadvantage, requires sustained and evidence-informed approaches that strengthen participation and belonging throughout school and during key post-school transitions, supported by stronger longitudinal data capability, early identification systems, flexible engagement pathways, and coordinated transition supports. Our recommendations are:

1. Strengthen early identification and timely response to disengagement risk to prevent early school leaving
2. Invest in flexible, personalised, strengths-based supports that respond to changing student circumstances
3. Improve continuity of support across school and post-school transitions
4. Strengthen holistic, relational and culturally safe supports for young people experiencing disadvantage
5. Improve national data consistency and longitudinal linkage
6. Expand national measures of attainment and transition success

References

- Austin, K., O'Shea, S., Groves, O., & Lamanna, J. (2022). Best-practice career education for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Final report. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University.
- Bennett, D., Coffey, J., Bawa S., Carney, D., Dockery, A., Franklyn, K., Koshy, P., Li, W., Parida, S., & Unwin, S. (2022). Ameliorating disadvantage: Creating accessible, effective and equitable careers and study information for low SES students. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University.
- Dupéré, V., Leventhal, T., Dion, E., Crosnoe, R., Archambault, I., & Janosz, M. (2015). Stressors and turning points in high school and dropout: A stress process, life course framework. *Review of Educational Research*, 85(4), 591–629. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654314559845>
- González-Rodríguez, D., Vieira, M. J., & Vidal, J. (2019). Factors that influence early school leaving: a comprehensive model. *Educational Research*, 61(2), 214-230.
- Peacock, H., & Guerzoni, M. (2022). Kids feeling good about being Indigenous at school and its link to heightened educational aspirations. In M. Walter (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Indigenous sociology* (pp. 293-309), Oxford University Press
- Prehn, J., Guerzoni, M., and Graham-Blair, J. (2024) Nurturing cultural identity: creating an inclusive school environment for Indigenous youths. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 52:1685–1705
- Moschion, J., & van Ours, J. C. (2025). Lifting up the lives of extremely disadvantaged youth: The role of staying in school longer. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 238, 107205.
- The Smith Family (2023). Pathways, Engagement and Transitions: Experiences of early school leavers. [Pathways, engagement and transitions: experience of early school leavers](#)
- The Smith Family (2024). Pathways, Engagement and Transitions: Young people's insights on navigating post-school pathways. [Pathways engagement and transitions: Young people's insights on navigating post-school pathways](#)
- The Smith Family (2025). Pathways, Engagement and Transitions: How young people experiencing disadvantage navigate the first three years after leaving school. [Pathways Engagement and Transitions: How young people experiencing disadvantage navigate the first three years after leaving school](#)