



*everyone's family*

# **Submission on *The Education State* Consultation Paper**

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## Introduction

The Smith Family warmly welcomes the Victorian Government's Consultation process regarding *The Education State*. Educational attainment is an important predictor of an individual's future employment, health and welfare prospects (Victorian Auditor-General 2012: vii). Victoria's economic prosperity and social cohesion, now and into the future, relies heavily on its capacity to realise the full potential of all its population.

Adopting the goal of the 'Education State' is a bold ambition and one which The Smith Family supports, given the fundamental importance of education both to individuals and the community as a whole. Of particular resonance is the "public guarantee of educational excellence and opportunity in every community" (Department of Education and Training 2015: 2)

Given the strong cross-sectoral and cross-portfolio links that will be required to ensure these goals are achieved, The Smith Family would urge that consideration be given by the Government to developing a Victorian framework for children and young people. This would ensure public visibility of the importance of the wellbeing of children and young people and serve to emphasise that individuals, rather than portfolios, are at the core of the state's intent.

In this context, The Smith Family notes the value of reports such as the *State of Victoria's children*, which was last produced in 2012. We also note the development of the *Balart Boorron* 2010-2020 plan for Aboriginal Children and Young People which was signed by six Ministers and the *Vulnerable Children Action Plan*. These are important cross-portfolio initiatives which articulate the joint efforts required to achieve positive outcomes for particular groups of children and young people. While in no way under-emphasising the importance of approaches that focus on Aboriginal and other vulnerable children and young people, The Smith Family would suggest that given the Government's ambitious goals, there is value in considering a comprehensive plan which focuses on all Victorian children and young people.

The Smith Family also endorses the consultative approach being taken to thinking through the steps required to realise the goal of being the 'Education State'. Broad community ownership and cross-sectoral engagement will be essential if this goal is to be achieved. In line with this approach, this submission has been developed following consultation with staff from across the communities where The Smith Family works.

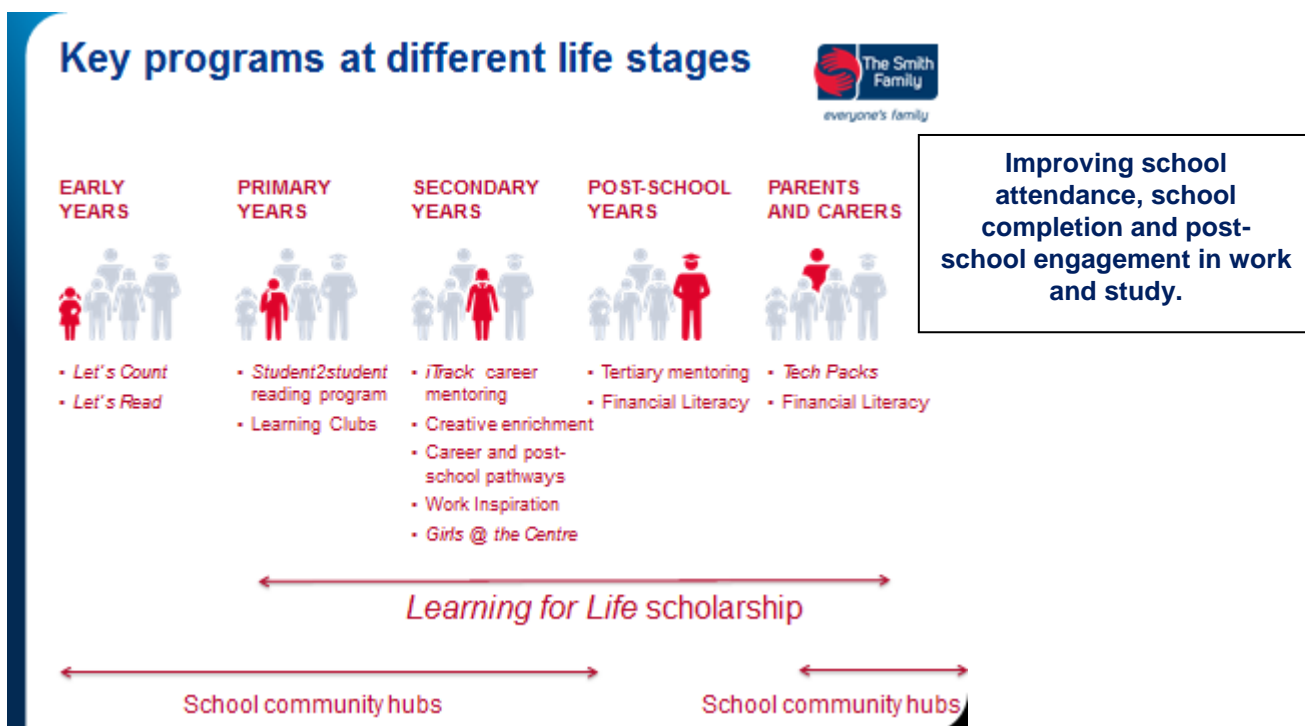
## The Smith Family

The Smith Family is Australia's largest education-oriented charity and delivers programs in 94 communities across all states and territories. In the 2013-14 financial year we supported over 134,000 disadvantaged children, young people and their families. This included over 15,500 from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

In Victoria, we work across 14 communities, half of which are regional, including Ballarat, Morwell and Shepparton. In 2013-14 we supported around 24,000 disadvantaged children, young people and their families in Victoria. Around 1,100 of these young people and their carers/parents were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Our programs begin in the early years and continue through to tertiary education, as shown in Figure 1. Our largest program, *Learning for Life*, is a long-term educational scholarship which supports around 34,000 children and young people each year nationally, including 7,000 in Victoria. We also facilitate a number of school community hubs in Victoria which involve a range of cross-sector partnerships focused on improving educational outcomes. Around 1,800 children, young people, parents/carers and community workers were involved in these hubs over the last year.

**Figure 1: Educational programs at different stages of a young person's life**



Mindful of the fact that collaboration is essential for improving student outcomes, our approach is very much one of partnerships - with families, schools, governments, corporates and philanthropy. We have 500 partner schools and work with 137 corporates, 73 Trusts and Foundations and 25 Universities across Australia. In Victoria we partner with approximately 85 schools.

The Smith Family is working to improve three key longer-term outcomes for the young people we support, namely: school attendance, school completion and engagement in employment, education or training post-school. These are in line with the goals of the National Education Agreement.

## **Current strengths and challenges for Victoria's education**

The Smith Family acknowledges the many strengths of the current Victorian education system. As the Consultation Paper identifies, at the aggregate level, Victorian children and young people perform well across a range of educational outcomes, at different stages of their lives. A particular strength of the Victorian approach has been the focus in the early years which has seen strong participation in maternal and child health services and kindergarten. The examples of cross sectoral partnerships, involving governments of different levels and portfolios, the non-government sector and business, which are found in various communities across the state, are also a strength.

### **Challenges**

The Smith Family welcomes the consultation's strong focus on how Victoria's education system can be enhanced - only with such an open mindset can change occur. Of particular concern to The Smith Family are the significant proportions of children and young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are not achieving positive educational outcomes. This is highlighted by:

- The high proportion of children from disadvantaged communities who begin school behind – one in four in communities such as Dandenong, Hume, La Trobe and Shepparton (Australian Government 2013).
- Victoria's performance on NAPLAN with regards to student gain. Victorian students in Year 3 in 2008, performed well on NAPLAN in reading, spelling and numeracy, however by Year 9, they had made the smallest gains in NAPLAN scores of any jurisdiction, except Tasmania with respect to a single domain (numeracy) (Need to Succeed 2015: 7).
- The close to 30% difference in Apparent Retention rates from Year 7 to Year 12 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students compared to non-Aboriginal students (SCRGSP 2015).
- The 10% difference in Year 12 completion rates for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (SES) compared to those from high SES (75% compared with 85%).(SCRGSP 2015)

This data on educational outcomes highlights the importance of ensuring there is an ongoing focus on how particular groups of students are progressing and flags that there is significant work to be done to close the gap on educational outcomes for young Victorians from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Smith Family's experience has identified a range of challenges which, if addressed, could significantly contribute to realising the Government's very important commitment of ensuring excellence for "all students, from all backgrounds, and in all contexts": These challenges include:

- **Supporting children and their families in the early years**  
While noting the long-standing and strong focus on the early years of the Victorian system, some disadvantaged children are still missing out on key learning and development opportunities, both in formal and informal settings. As a consequence, they are starting school behind and many find it difficult to 'catch up'. This constitutes a major challenge to the system as a whole.
- **Children who need additional support**  
Many children who need additional assistance to realise their potential are not currently receiving the early intervention support they need, in part because their needs are not defined as being sufficiently 'acute' to meet funding guidelines. While cognisant of budget constraints, the consequence of this is that these children can fall through the gap, and never achieve the educational and post-school outcomes they have the potential to.
- **Capacity to meet individual student needs**  
The capacity of the system, from a curriculum and pedagogical perspective, to meet the diversity of individual students' needs and interests is not yet optimal. Recent research from the Grattan Institute (Goss et al. 2015) has highlighted that there is a large spread of ability levels in Australian classrooms, including as much as eight years difference in ability in Victorian Year 8 maths classes, between the top and bottom students. Further, while acknowledging that Victoria's Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) has made a significant and long-standing contribution, there continues to be some tension between 'academic' and more 'vocational' education streams in the Victorian system. There has also not yet been a systemic focus on developing what Yong Zhao has described as 'world class learners' with a focus on educating 'creative and entrepreneurial students' (Zhao 2012).

- **Strong and sustained cross-sectoral networks**  
The capacity to create and maintain strong and purposeful connections between schools, business, non-government and training organisations and the broader community, is currently a challenge for the system. While there are some good examples of this occurring throughout the state, it is not systemic, despite being particularly important in disadvantaged schools and communities, if student outcomes are to be improved.
- **Integrating various policy reviews**  
At a policy and system level, one of the challenges facing Victoria is to ensure that the outcomes of the various important reviews currently underway, such as regarding VET and school funding, are coherently integrated. The linkages between such reviews need to be made explicit so the impact of initiatives is complementary, rather than dissipating efforts.

### **What does success look like?**

The Smith Family strongly endorses two key perspectives highlighted in the *Education State Consultation Papers*, namely:

- the “public guarantee of educational excellence and opportunity in every community” and
- that excellence is for “all students, from all backgrounds, and in all contexts”:

The combined focus of excellence and equity is essential and the realisation of these goals would be a great achievement for Victoria.

### **A broad vision of education**

The Smith Family is of the view that Victoria’s education system should be underpinned by a broad vision and that the United Nations’ *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* provide direction on this.

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* identifies in Article 29 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*, as well as identifying the goals of equity and excellence, also identifies that all young Australians be: successful learners; confident and creative individuals; and active and informed citizens. It notes that 'improving educational outcomes for all young Australians will position young people to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives.' The Declaration identifies 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'<sup>1</sup>.

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, the state and the nation as a whole. They should inform efforts aimed at developing Victoria as the 'Education State'.

### **World class learners**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is appropriate that success not be defined just in the national context, but rather, internationally - young Victorians should be 'world class learners' able to hold their own in a global context.

The work of Yong Zhao (2012) suggests some of the characteristics of a system which would create world class learners. Some which we would highlight of particular relevance to this consultation process are:

- A strengths based approach to learning, within a context which both emphasises a global perspective and values local school and community strengths.
- A broad and flexible curriculum where students have some choice to pursue their own interests.
- Students have a voice within schools and participate in school governance.
- Personalised support for students including a strong focus on mentoring. The Smith Family has a strong history of providing mentoring programs to disadvantaged students and welcomes recent developments from the Victorian Government which highlight their policy interest in this area.
- An emphasis on partnerships, including potentially global partnerships and opportunities.

Given Yong Zhao's visits to Victoria, the potential exists for the state to lead Australia in developing a system capable of developing truly 'world class learners'.

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<sup>1</sup> Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008

## Enhancing parental engagement

Critical to educational success is strong student and parent/family engagement in learning. Research shows that parental engagement in children's learning is a bigger predictor of how children do in school than a family's socioeconomic status. 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 (Fox & Olsen 2014). Genuine and deep student and parental engagement in learning would be a hallmark of a truly successful education system.

While to date there has been considerable focus in Victoria on improving teacher quality, there has been generally less focus on how to enhance parental engagement. This is in part, perhaps, because of what the Mitchell Institute has labelled the 'false dichotomy' between school and home (Bentley & Cazaly 2015: 21) While teacher quality is the most potent *in-school* influence on learning outcomes, students themselves and their home environment account for over half of the variation in achievement.

From a policy perspective, it has sometimes been assumed that only 'in-school' factors can be influenced, hence the focus across Australia on teacher quality. Schools also commonly report great difficulties in engaging parents and carers of disadvantaged students to support their children's education (Productivity Commission 2012: 21). New teachers feel particularly ill-equipped to engage with parents - a quarter of primary school early career teachers and close to a third of secondary school early career teachers found their pre-service training not helpful at all in equipping them to 'work effectively with parents/guardians' (Productivity Commission 2012: 263). This is a significant and missed opportunity which a successful system would address.

In contrast, the experience of many non-government organisations, such as The Smith Family, shows that there is significant potential to positively influence the home learning environment and to support parents' engagement in their child's learning, beginning in the early years and continuing right through school and into early adulthood. The Smith Family works with highly disadvantaged families who enter into a long-term partnership agreement (potentially for 17 years) with the shared purpose of supporting their child's education. Half of the secondary students who are on our *Learning for Life* scholarship have been on the program for five years or more, emphasising their family's long-term engagement in education.

A truly successful system would seek to harness the potential of parental engagement given its positive impact on children's wellbeing and learning outcomes. It would identify non-government organisations as key partners in this effort. Success would see young people's learning being mutually reinforced across multiple environments, including the school and outside school environments, such as the home and wider community.



### **Deep and sustained cross sectoral partnerships**

A successful learning system would complement a strong focus on parental engagement with deep and sustained cross-sectoral partnerships aimed at improving young people's outcomes. There is strong consensus that schools cannot be expected to do the work of improving student outcomes alone, particularly in schools serving communities characterised by socio-economic disadvantage (DEECD 2013). These cross-sectoral partnerships would be supported by governance arrangements, resources and outcome frameworks, which value local flexibility, while simultaneously providing appropriate support and accountability mechanisms. Such partnerships would respect and acknowledge the diversity of individual and organisational expertise and resources, which are needed to ensure all young people thrive.

### **School funding**

A successful education system would use a needs based funding model which is underpinned by evidence and understood by the community. It would have accountability mechanisms to ensure funds are spent where they are needed and desired outcomes are achieved. Funding would include consideration of Indigeneity, and use measures of low socio-economic background which take account of both parental employment and education. A successful system would ensure that 'top-up' payments for equity are significant enough to achieve excellence for all.

Autonomy has been a valued hallmark of Victorian schools for many years, with principals holding significant decision-making power over school staffing and budgeting. This can enable those closest to the school community to make key decisions regarding how funds are allocated.

However, in a successful system, there should also be clear accountability measures for both how the funding, particularly that associated with additional loadings is spent, and the resulting impact on the educational attainment of disadvantaged students, to ensure such funding is spent to yield the greatest benefit. This accountability should ensure there are appropriate levels of support available so schools can acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to research, evaluate and make decisions based on the most cost effective means of delivering improvements.

In the United Kingdom for example, in response to a number of accountability measures, support services to facilitate the undertaking and dissemination of education research, and opportunities for collaboration between schools and research institutes, were phased in. Greater engagement with research and a more evidence informed use funds followed these reforms.

In a successful system, The Smith Family suggests there would be appropriate accountability mechanisms and research support for school leaders and teachers to complement the use of loading funding.

### **An enhanced focus on vulnerable children in the early years**

A successful system would seek to ensure that all children start school ready to learn, setting them up for long term success. In exploring how to achieve this, consideration could also be given to an initiative to be implemented in the United Kingdom which will see all disadvantaged two year olds funded to receive 15 hours of free childcare. Implementing such an approach would make a significant statement both within the state and nationally, of the value Victoria places on early intervention, equity and supporting young children to thrive.

### **A 'seamless' system which values all stages of development**

A successful system would be relatively 'seamless' from the perspective of young people and their families, from the early years right through to post-school transitions into employment and further training. It would acknowledge important transitions, as well as value the 'middle years'. This is a period which currently receives limited attention, yet is a time when many young people disengage from learning. Both academic and more vocationally oriented pathways would be valued and there would be a much stronger focus on supporting young people to make informed career choices and provide exposure to meaningful work experience. This would be made possible by deeper relationships with industry and business, often facilitated by non-government organisations.

### **Long term strategy and planning**

A successful education system would have a long-term strategy, planning and funding processes which put children and young people at the centre, generate broad community ownership and support, and move away from education being a highly 'political' issue within the community. It would take a cross-portfolio approach and identify the desired outcomes for all children and young people.

The strategy would see funds allocated to those programs and initiatives which are evidence informed. While innovation would continue to be valued, there would not be a continual stream of one-off pilots, which serve to drain resources, energy and effort. Rather there would be a systematic approach to evaluation, continuous improvement, to sharing what works and doesn't work and to scaling cost-effective initiatives. An important part of this would be publicly available data which allows progress to be assessed, both at the aggregate level and for particular groups of children.

A successful system would also ensure there are diverse and systemic opportunities for the range of educational stakeholders to contribute to ongoing policy and program development. The principles of collaboration and consultation which have been underway in the 'Education State' process would be embedded in a successful system.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of an 'Education State' is a bold ambition which The Smith Family supports. It also strongly endorses the joint goals of excellence and equity which the Government has identified.

The Victorian education system currently has a range of strengths which provide the foundations on which to build. Critical to achieving the goal of an Education State, is putting children and young people at the centre, fostering parental engagement in their child's learning and developing strong cross-sectoral and cross-portfolio links.

The Smith Family welcomes the consultative approach which has been taken to date and looks forward to participating in the next steps which will see Victoria move closer to the goal of being the 'Education State'.

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