



# Opening Doors: The role of sponsorship in addressing disadvantage

Summary Report



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

Centre for  
Program  
Evaluation



*everyone's family*

# Opening Doors: The role of sponsorship in addressing disadvantage

## Summary Report

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# Foreword

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There is an old Chinese proverb that says “When planning for a year, plant corn; when planning for a decade, plant trees; when planning for life, train and educate people.”

As common sense as this may seem today, ten years ago very few recognised the importance of education in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. In fact, with the focus squarely on record employment within the burgeoning Australian economy, many disputed the very existence of disadvantage in our ‘lucky country’, beyond the persistent and more visible challenges of our Indigenous communities. The 700,000 children living in jobless households at the turn of this century appeared all but invisible to the broader psyche of prosperity - a ‘tail’ of disadvantage that would somehow be resolved through the predominant welfare-based approaches of the day or the natural ‘trickle down’ effects of the market economy.

However, it was quickly becoming clear that the provision of financial assistance in the form of welfare, while meeting some important short-term material challenges, was treating the symptoms rather than the root causes of disadvantage. In other words, the 21st century required a more complex, multi-layered response to disadvantage based on the premise of providing families with a more empowering ‘hand-up’ rather than a ‘hand-out’, with research pointing to education as the key to unlocking the opportunities they needed to make a better life for themselves.

For this reason, in 1999 The Smith Family began a seven-year organisational transformation, moving away from our historical welfare-orientation to a social enterprise focused on kids and education. One component of this was the *Learning for Life* financial sponsorship which over time became the entrée for the participation of students and their families in a broader suite of programs supporting their learning and development.

Today, over 30,000 disadvantaged students in primary, secondary and tertiary education benefit from The Smith Family’s *Learning for Life* sponsorship and suite of literacy programs, and are connected to more than 18,000 sponsors. This report provides a summary of the key findings from a comprehensive review of this program carried out by the Centre for Program Evaluation at the University of Melbourne, with the support of the AMP Foundation. Among other things, it highlights the continuing relevance and effectiveness of the sponsorship program in

addressing disadvantage by using financial assistance as the entrée for students and their families to participate in a broader range of evidence-based initiatives to enhance their learning and development.

None of this could be achieved without the support of thousands of generous individuals who as sponsors are opening up new worlds and opportunities for the one in seven children who currently face a life of disadvantage in Australia (ABS Survey of Income and Housing 2005-06). The insights of this report demonstrate the enormous value that you are providing in creating a more caring and cohesive community.



**Elaine Henry, CEO**

**The Smith Family**



## Executive summary

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Several decades of empirical investigation have demonstrated that students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are vulnerable to poor educational achievement and are at risk of becoming trapped in an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

This report looks at the role of financial assistance in breaking the cycle of disadvantage for children and young people in Australia, using the example of a sponsorship model that works to help these individuals remove the many barriers they face to their fuller participation in education. It presents a snapshot of findings from a comprehensive evaluation completed in 2009 by the Centre for Program Evaluation at the University of Melbourne into the *Learning for Life* sponsorship model offered by The Smith Family, a national, independent social enterprise focused on kids and education (see Box 1).

This study included a focus on how financial assistance might generate educational outcomes for students.

A review of social science theory from the current national and international evidence base and interviews with over 200 school staff, sponsorship recipients and their families as well as staff from

The Smith Family, highlighted that sponsorships activate a variety of 'social mechanisms' that are the psychological and social enablers of educational achievement, including:

- helping students to 'fit in' with their peers
- raising their educational aspirations
- improving academic self-efficacy
- reducing the negative impact of lower expectations that may prejudice teacher attitudes to disadvantaged students; and
- building social capital.

It demonstrated that sponsorships:

- can generate educational outcomes through triggering these social mechanisms that increase the likelihood of educational success;
- are more likely to lead to outcomes when implemented as the entree or gateway to the students' participation in other programs as well as when those who administer the sponsorship have a knowledge of the link between potential outcomes and the social mechanisms that may generate them;

- sponsorships *open doors* not only for students but also for non-profit organisations to engage more deeply with communities and provide a more comprehensive suite of program support; and
- sponsorships may contribute to the ultimate outcome of reducing the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage.

Overall the research concluded that the rationale for a sponsorship model of financial assistance is sound, demonstrated by its capacity to foster a series of supportive relationships and connections, not only between a student and a 'significant other' in the form of a sponsor, but also between a student and their peers, teachers and parents, in addition to community building. It is these relationships in combination with the financial assistance, rather than the financial assistance alone, that enable the sponsorship to generate educational outcomes for students and contribute to breaking the cycle of disadvantage more broadly.

## Box 1 - The Smith Family's Sponsorship Model

The Smith Family's focus on children and education is the strategy developed by our organisation to remain relevant while embracing the challenges of 21st century Australia.

Research told us that Australia was entering the knowledge era and that this required at a national level an increase in the **participation** of those who had previously been marginalised in order to lift our pool of 'human capital', and an increase in the **engagement** of those who had the ability to give of time, talent and dollars to secure our 'social capital', the glue that binds us together, which was in danger of disintegrating.

Embedded within the organisation at that time was a kernel of an idea in the *Learning for Life* financial sponsorship which, with the assistance of research findings, had the potential to grow into a suite of programs. *Learning for Life* was seen to have many positive attributes, not least that it came about not in response to the needs of the organisation but to the wishes of our families receiving emergency help. Way back in 1987, they identified education as the way out of the cycle of disadvantage for their children. The development of the *Learning for Life* sponsorship not only enabled their children's greater participation in education, but also provided opportunities to engage caring members of the wider community in a more involved manner with them through child sponsorship.

Today, the sponsorship is but one component of a wide suite of *Learning for Life* programs providing support to disadvantaged children and their families across the life course. By successfully intertwining the elements of participation and engagement, it exemplifies the DNA underpinning every aspect of the contemporary Smith Family and our societal change agenda.

The sponsorship is administered by The Smith Family fully respecting privacy and child protection legislation and relies on the collaboration between students, parents, sponsors, The Smith Family staff, schools, third party community organisations and corporate partners.



## What outcomes can be linked to the sponsorship?

Overall, students in receipt of support from *Learning for Life* sponsorship and their families were very positive about the conditional financial assistance they received. The key themes to emerge from in-depth interviews and focus groups were that:

- Access to a sponsorship helps families to overcome financial barriers to educational participation;
- It is important for keeping students engaged in education;
- Support from sponsors contributes to a sense of self-worth; and
- Receiving a sponsorship assists with integration into society and the world of work.

These findings were corroborated by staff from The Smith Family, as well as representatives of schools and various community partners who administer the sponsorship on behalf of The Smith Family. The latter also suggested that the presence of sponsorships and programs helps support local efforts to address community-level determinants of educational disadvantage.

School staff indicated that student sponsorship through *Learning for Life* had led in many cases to noticeable improvements in the educational participation and involvement in learning of disadvantaged students. This was reflected by improved rates of school attendance and stronger relationships between schools, families and the community. Some teachers also reported that in addition to reducing demand for emergency relief for uniforms and schoolbooks, the sponsorship (particularly when delivered in conjunction with other targeted programs) had helped to lift literacy and numeracy benchmarks at their school.

However, accurately measuring and tracking sponsorship outcomes is not a straightforward task. This is because the causal chain linking the sponsorship to individual, family and community level outcomes is not linear. Rather it is complex, multilayered and diffuse. The further one moves along the causal chain of the sponsorship – from the direct effects such as improved capacity to pay for the costs of education to better educational performance and on to a reduction in the intergenerational cycle of

disadvantage, the more 'external factors' outside the direct control of the sponsorship come into play.

This means that any observed improvements in educational outcomes are likely to be attributable not only to the sponsorship but also to other touch points such as programs being accessed, the quality of the school people attend, support from family and friends, academic aspirations and motivation, opportunity to attend university and so on. So many variables are at play that it is extremely difficult to determine whether educational success is as a result of the sponsorship or a composite of other factors.

Importantly, data collected by The Smith Family on an annual basis (see Box 2) suggests that participation in the sponsorship has enabled more and more students each year to finish secondary schooling and go on to tertiary education, many of them being the first in their family to do so and as such marking a significant break in repeating the experiences of their parents.

## Box 2 - The Smith Family *Learning for Life* Sponsorship Outcomes

- The number of students successfully transitioning from year 10 to year 11 has steadily increased in the last three years. In 2009 80% of the year 10 *Learning for Life* students transitioned to year 11 in 2010. This is compared to 73% transitioning from year 10 in 2007 to year 11 in 2008.
- 50% of our 2008 Year 12 *Learning for Life* students went on to commence tertiary studies in 2009, up from 47.5% in 2008.



## How does sponsorship contribute to these outcomes?

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The sponsorship model is designed to provide students with two fundamental forms of support. Firstly by enabling students to obtain the necessary educational resources such as books and uniforms so they can participate in school and tertiary education, enrichment opportunities such as excursions and extra-curricular activities. Second, and most importantly, it connects them with a 'significant other' - a member of the Australian public providing anonymous support.

These two streams of support then link together to trigger a range of social impacts that, in different ways, lead to improved outcomes for students and their families.

### The opportunity to 'fit in'

Research has shown that educational engagement, retention and attainment are all strongly influenced by the connection a student feels to their learning environment, particularly with regard to how well they feel they 'fit in' with their peers and 'belong'. Fitting in is important for self esteem, however, it is also critical to enable individuals to gain exposure to prevailing

social norms and to learn how to use them to one's advantage (Bourdieu, 1974). As research shows, the more individuals are able to do this the more successful they will be in society.

The financial element of the sponsorship contributes to this by minimising the likelihood of alienation that comes from not being able to afford the right uniform or attend the same excursions as other kids.

*"Kids who can't participate in excursions and camps miss out on all the rich learning experiences and social bonding and networking experiences that kids who do participate get exposure to. Having the sponsorship helps them to tap into those additional educational and social opportunities."*

School counsellor

## Changing the perceptions of teachers, parents and peers

Sponsorship can improve students' participation by affecting the perceptions of others including teachers, parents and peers. It can raise the standards and expectations that teachers have for their students and reduce negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Research has shown that teachers' expectations (conscious and unconscious) about students from disadvantaged backgrounds can have a significant impact on the schooling that they receive. If a teacher expects disadvantaged students to under-perform at school, then they will under-perform. This is because of the principle that expectations, even if initially false, are brought about because of the belief that they are true (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

*"We've been on the sponsorship program for a year. Now that [my child] is getting the sponsorship, her teacher encourages her to study harder and gives her extra encouragement."*  
Sponsorship parent

Furthermore, sponsorship can help to change the perceptions of parents. This is important because young people are influenced by their parents' educational expectations and aspirations which often vary depending on their perceived social class and their parents' level of education (Boudon, 1998). Disadvantaged parents may have had negative educational experiences in the past and often do not know how to support or connect with their children's education. The sponsorship can provide a focal point through which to enhance the capacity and involvement of parents in their children's education (the **'help us help our kids'** sentiment) such as shared reading, participating in school events and activities, talking to them about homework and academic issues as well as influencing the educational aspirations they hold for their children.

*"Without the sponsorship I am not sure if going to uni would be an option for my son, (with it) it gives you a sense of hope for the future."*  
Parent of 15 year old sponsorship recipient

## A 'significant other'

A sponsorship connects a young person with a 'significant other'. They are not a parent or a teacher of that young person but rather someone from the wider Australian community who believes in the importance of education and the student's ability to achieve.

This relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored student is integral to the success of the sponsorship and this is cemented through regular correspondence between the two individuals. The importance of this relationship is the contribution that it makes to developing a sense of self worth in the student.

This is powerful as the beliefs that young people hold about their ability to succeed at school shapes their actual performance (Bandura, 1997). Belief in oneself and abilities can determine how students' feel, think, motivate themselves and behave which in turn increases educational aspirations and improves educational outcomes. Knowing they have the ongoing support of a sponsor over a number of years encourages students to develop self-belief in their academic ability.

The communication of what the sponsorship is and does is absolutely critical to triggering its positive social impacts.

*"...someone else believing in you, believing that you will achieve your goal is very important. It motivates you, gives you confidence."*  
Tertiary sponsorship recipient

The cultivation of the **'I can do it'** sentiment depends on the sponsor, student and staff correcting any wrongful depiction of the sponsorship as a form of welfare support. Not only can this lead to embarrassment associated with the perception of being a 'welfare recipient', but it may also negatively influence educational aspirations and should therefore be minimised through careful communication and considered terminology.

The study found that if a student is not aware that they are receiving a sponsorship, the increase in academic self-belief may not be triggered. Moreover, if a student interprets the purpose of the sponsorship negatively, for example, as proof that they are not as 'smart' as other students, or they feel over-pressured to do well at school because of the sponsorship, then the academic self-belief mechanism may be triggered, but could generate unintended negative outcomes.

## Building ‘caring communities’

Social inclusion requires the connection and contribution of both the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ in society. In this way, it goes beyond social exclusion interventions which are typically focused on groups that are disadvantaged.

The sponsorship contributes to social inclusion and community building by providing opportunities for individuals and corporate sponsors to form direct relationships with disadvantaged families (Coleman, 1988). This allows benefits to accrue on both sides in terms of breaking down prejudicial attitudes and stereotypes and forming a greater shared understanding and respect for each other. The sponsor may also be able to provide access to information and resources that a student’s family may not be aware of, helping increase their motivation by alerting them to a broad range of positive role models outside their own family. The benefits may include additional motivation, a reinforcement of the importance of education, access to information and resources, positive role models and support outside the family.

## ‘Opening doors’ to enhance relationships with schools and disadvantaged communities

From the perspective of The Smith Family, the sponsorship is also the entree to forming and strengthening relationships with other community organisations.

It takes time for trusting relationships to develop at the community level between either families or schools and The Smith Family. Offering the sponsorship to students in a community is an important first step in developing these relationships because it provides assistance in a way that is not intrusive or demanding of time and demonstrates a shared commitment to young people which builds trust.

People are more likely to agree to a large request if you get them to agree to a small or modest request first (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). This **‘Foot in the door’** principle has enabled organisations such as The Smith Family to utilise sponsorships to gain access to disadvantaged schools and communities across the country. Encouraging stakeholders to work with The Smith Family through the provision of sponsorships, leads to opportunities for collaboration and partnership to deliver programs that benefit disadvantaged families.

*“Sponsorships facilitated The Smith Family’s entree into communities around Australia as they were seen to be adding value to what already existed. Without this value-add ‘product’, our ability to be embedded in communities might not have been so readily accepted.”*

Elaine Henry, CEO The Smith Family



## Conclusion and recommendations

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Sponsorships are but one element in the larger package of support for students and their families that is needed to break the cycle of disadvantage through education. However, it plays a vital role in acting as the trigger for all of the positive social sentiments described above, if it is administered in accordance with the following recommendations:

1. It is viewed in the context of the relationships that it facilitates such as the 'significant other' in the form of a sponsor as well as the strengthening of existing social supports such as parents and teachers;
2. It is seen as an enabler that promotes the opportunity to provide other program interventions. (For example, parenting programs assist in activating the 'help us help our kids' mechanism; mentoring further promotes 'academic self efficacy'; working more closely with teachers and the school community targets the 'fitting in' and 'you're not so different after all' mechanisms);
3. That the sponsorship is not communicated or perceived as a welfare payment as this has a negative impact on self esteem and efficacy; and
4. To maximise the impact of the sponsorship it is essential that every effort is made to positively activate the social mechanisms identified as part of the sponsorship model. It is critical that it is

administered by staff who understand how the sponsorship delivers on the broader outcomes of educational achievement and breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

The research and evidence-base underpinning the importance of sponsorships is compelling, suggesting the impact is far greater than if financial assistance were offered in isolation and without a sponsor acting as a 'significant other'. Those who have been involved in the sponsorship since its inception two decades ago – either as staff, recipients, or sponsors - have long known about the power of small financial incentives to transform the lives of disadvantaged families. This study provided further theoretical and empirical evidence to support this assumption.

We now better understand the critical role that a sponsor plays in assisting students to achieve educational outcomes - and it is about more than just dollars. As well as unlocking opportunities for participation, and influencing the expectations of parents and teachers, the sponsorship links a student with a significant other who has the ability to offer something as powerful as the ability to believe in themselves.

## One sponsor's rewarding experience

"I have been most fortunate to be a sponsor for The Smith Family *Learning for Life* program for over eight years. During this time, I have chosen to sponsor the same student, Ben\*, through the program's primary, junior secondary and senior secondary levels. This has proved a most rewarding and heartwarming experience for me, as Ben is now in Year 12 and about to complete his final year of high school. The program is completely anonymous with only Ben's first name and Australian resident status known to me, as well as strict correspondence guidelines on my part to protect my anonymity.

I am so very proud of him and his courage, responsibility, eagerness and hard working application to pursue his education, despite his concurrent difficult home life situation. I have particularly looked forward to and enjoyed receiving his *Learning For Life* Student Updates and Profiles each year which indicate how the sponsorship program money has been utilised. Ben has always received the most complimentary reports about his capable, enthusiastic educational efforts and his friendly, cooperative disposition.

I have been most touched, however, by his dedication to his family (his father and two sisters from 2003), in which year his father wrote how "impressed he was with Ben's behaviour and attitude about life and the circumstances the family has been through." In this report and again years later, Ben described his father as the person he looks up to most and wrote of his pride for his dad "because without his efforts to look after his kids... we would all be leading different and probably horrible lives..." Ben always "helped out at home" with the cleaning and shopping, and also gained continuing paid part-time employment beginning at a butcher's when he was only 14 years old.

His written pride at being part of the program and gratitude at the opportunities offered by the receipt of the sponsorship money has also moved me greatly. For example, one year Ben was able to attend a school camp and buy all his school photos. My *Learning for Life* sponsorship donations, however, primarily enabled Ben to buy "all his school supplies" such as new school books, bags, shoes and clothes. These extra costs are often overlooked in a child's 'free' public schooling and can create great pressure for the families as well as a sense of social exclusion on the part of the student. Ben has extended his

"heart-felt thanks" to me and written that he "will remember (my) kindness for years to come".

It has also been wonderful to read of his interests, hobbies, likes and dislikes flow with the vicissitudes of adolescence as he developed into a fine young man. I sincerely hope for a smooth transition into the next stage of Ben's schooling/career path and have been informed by The Smith Family that I have opportunities to ensure that he receives the guidance required, as well as the choice to be part of his sponsorship at the tertiary or apprenticeship levels. I wish Ben all the very best in his future endeavours and truly believe that I have gained as much from the sponsorship program as described in the above-mentioned rewarding experiences of being a sponsor, as Ben has in completing his education with less financial hardship.

Charity begins at home. Ben lived this in his difficult home situation by generously and responsibly helping his family out as best he could. There are too many children living in disadvantaged families in Australia today, yet we are fortunate that in this country education still provides every one with the opportunity for an improved future life situation. The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program offers every member of society the chance to become a sponsor and make a difference to a fellow Australian child's life. I urge each one of you to consider joining this truly transformational, rewarding and wonderful program that we are so fortunate to be offered by The Smith Family."

- *Learning for Life* sponsor

\*Student's name has been changed to protect his privacy.

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