



# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

*The Learning for Life program*

**The Smith Family** Research Report  
2016

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All photos in this publication are of students and families supported by The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program.

# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians: The Learning for Life program



## 1. Executive summary

### Education benefits individuals and nations

Educational attainment is an important predictor of a person's future employment, income, health and welfare prospects.

Young people who complete Year 12 have a greater likelihood of being employed throughout their adult life and are less likely to be reliant on welfare, compared to their peers who do not complete school.

Educational attainment is even more important in the technology-rich global 21st century. A range of low-skilled work is becoming increasingly automated and demand for some higher level skills is growing. Today 75 percent of the fastest growing occupations require science, technology, engineering and maths skills.

The skills of a nation's population strongly influence its Gross Domestic Product, economic growth, innovation capability and social development.

A modest improvement in the educational outcomes of young Australians would result in significant economic gains. The impact would grow over time, as higher skilled school leavers become a larger proportion of the workforce.

### Australia's educational challenge

Educational disadvantage begins early in Australia, continues throughout school and into post-school transitions. One in three (32.6 percent) children from Australia's most disadvantaged communities does not meet one or more key developmental milestones in their first year of school. This compares to 15.5 percent of children from the most advantaged communities.

By age 24, only 58.9 percent of young people from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds are fully engaged in education, training or work. This compares to 83.1 percent of those from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds. Poor post-school transitions place young people at significant risk of negative long-term economic and social outcomes, including poverty and welfare dependency.

### International comparisons

The educational performance of young Australians significantly declined in reading and mathematical literacies between 2003 and 2012. Two in five (42 percent) 15 year old Australian students performed below the national mathematics baseline in 2012. Countries such as China, Singapore, Finland and Canada performed significantly better than Australia on international tests of both reading and mathematics in 2012.

### Influences on educational outcomes

Efforts aimed at improving Australia's educational performance need to take account of a complex range of personal, family, institutional, community and societal factors that influence young people's outcomes.

These include: young people's skills, knowledge and attitudes to learning; parents' engagement in their children's learning; the quality of teaching that young people experience; school culture; and the resources and networks young people and their families can access in their community.

### Intervene early, provide long-term support

Given the range of factors which impact, there is no single or short-term response that will achieve sustained and significant progress in the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people.

However, significant improvements **are** possible. Research by Nobel economist James Heckman highlights the broad principles which are required. The most cost-effective way of improving the educational and wellbeing outcomes of disadvantaged children, is to provide targeted support, that begins early in a child's life and continues in a balanced long-term way throughout their first two decades.

For the same overall investment, this approach is far more effective than concentrating support on a particular period of young people's lives, such as preschool or adolescence. This approach results in increases in high school graduation and university enrolments and decreases in welfare reliance and criminal convictions.

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## Individual factors influencing educational outcomes

### Achievement

A range of children's individual characteristics impact on their educational success. Early achievement is an important predictor of later success so ensuring young children develop foundational skills and positive learning behaviours is important.

### School attendance

School attendance is critical for academic achievement, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a group, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds have poorer school attendance rates than students from high socioeconomic backgrounds.

An attendance gap is obvious from the first year of school and this gap widens as they progress through school. Efforts aimed at ensuring children from low socioeconomic backgrounds have high school attendance rates, throughout all years of schooling, are critical.

### Developing non-cognitive skills

Non-cognitive skills, such as perseverance, motivation and academic confidence, are critical to students making the most of available learning opportunities. These skills are as powerful a predictor of later-life

outcomes as cognitive skills. Skills are not determined solely by genetic factors. They can be shaped, enhanced and changed over time. Children and young people can be supported to develop the attitudes and behaviours that positively influence educational outcomes. This includes setting goals and monitoring progress, valuing effort, seeking input from others, problem solving, persisting with difficult tasks and believing that intelligence can be developed.

### Student mobility

Moving schools has a negative impact on students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A student from a very low socioeconomic background, who experiences three or more moves during their first four years of secondary schooling, has a 65 percent probability of not completing Year 12.

## Family factors

Students from more advantaged backgrounds have greater access than students from disadvantaged backgrounds, to a range of financial, cultural and social resources that are important for educational success.

However, parental engagement in children's learning is a bigger predictor of how children do in school than a family's socioeconomic background. Parents influence children's beliefs about the value of education and

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are the most important influence on young people's decision to attend university.

Parents also influence children's understanding of the role of hard work in academic progression, children's confidence in their ability, as well as the development of a range of learning skills.

Students with engaged parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to do well at school, graduate and go on to higher education. Parental engagement in their child's learning is a tool that can help close the gap in achievement between young people of different backgrounds.

### In-school factors

Teachers account for about 30 percent of the variance in student achievement, and schools and principals a further five to ten percent.

Teachers' capacity to identify the individual learning needs of their students and adapt their teaching to what students are ready to learn is a key contribution that teachers make.

The culture of schools also influences outcomes. High learning expectations for all students and an emotionally nurturing environment are critical to all achieving their potential.

While in-school factors are important influences on educational achievement, 'beyond-school' factors are even more important. Student factors account for about 50 percent and the home an additional five to ten percent.

### Collaboration, data and evidence

Given the size of Australia's educational challenge, collaborative cross-sectoral and cross-institutional efforts are required to achieve sustainable improvements. A focus on evidence, longitudinal data which tracks progress over time, evaluation and scalable initiatives is critical.

### The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* scholarship program

The Smith Family commenced its *Learning for Life* scholarship program around 30 years ago because:

- Research shows education is key to breaking the cycle of disadvantage, intergenerational poverty and welfare dependency.

- Consultations with families supported by The Smith Family identified they would highly value help with their children's education.

### Long-term approach

Based on the evidence of what works to improve disadvantaged children's educational outcomes, students can begin on the *Learning for Life* program in the first year of school and continue through to the completion of tertiary education.

### Parental engagement

Parental engagement is central to the program and a shared commitment to improving children's educational outcomes is explicit in the Family Partnership Agreement which parents enter into with The Smith Family. The principles of mutual responsibility and high expectations regarding school attendance, school completion and post-school engagement in employment or further education, underpin the Agreement.

### Components of *Learning for Life*

The program has three integrated components:

- A modest **biannual payment** made to families to help them cover core education related expenses such as books, uniforms and excursions.
- A **Program Coordinator** (The Smith Family staff member) who works with the family and their school to support the young person's long-term participation in education.
- A range of **short programs** that help ensure the young person is engaged in education. Students develop the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours needed for long-term educational participation and success. Programs include literacy and numeracy, learning clubs, mentoring and career activities, as well as digital and financial literacy initiatives for parents.

Community engagement underpins the program. The vast majority of *Learning for Life* students are supported by individual sponsors. Extensive partnerships with schools, other educational institutions, corporates, non-government and philanthropic organisations, VIEW Clubs of Australia, and over 8,700 volunteers, are key to implementation. Diverse resources and expertise are harnessed and coordinated, to cost-effectively achieve the shared goal of improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young people.

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## Students on *Learning for Life*

Around 34,000 students are supported each year on the *Learning for Life* program. It is delivered in 94 communities across every Australian state and territory.

As a group, students on the program are highly disadvantaged:

- All are living in low income families (receiving a Government pension or Health Care Card).
- Around 6,000 (18 percent) are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.
- Over half live in a single parent family. A further six percent live with their grandparents, other family members or in foster care.
- 40 percent of students and 50 percent of parents/carers have a health or disability issue.
- 60 percent have a parent/carer who has not completed Year 12.
- Over 70 percent have a parent/carer who is not in paid employment.
- One in five students in Years 5 to 12 has attended four or more schools and one in twenty has been at six or more.

*Learning for Life* students are also more disadvantaged than their school peers, even though the schools they attend are classified as disadvantaged.

The program is targeting, and importantly reaching, young people who are at high risk of poor educational outcomes.

A major achievement is that students on the program, who are in secondary school or tertiary education, have been on the scholarship on average for six years or more. Families remain committed to their child's education, despite the significant level of disadvantage, disability, illness and mobility they experience.

## Outcomes of the *Learning for Life* program

Tracking the individual progress over time of students on the program is key to assessing its effectiveness. Each student on *Learning for Life* has a unique student identifier which enables their progress to be monitored. Data on a range of short-term outcomes is collected, such as increases in students' reading ability, motivation, confidence and knowledge of careers and post-school pathways. The focus on both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes is important given research shows the contribution both make to long-term educational success.



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The short-term outcomes are the foundations for achieving three key longer-term outcomes which The Smith Family has been tracking since 2012. These are:

1. School attendance (**Attendance Rate**)
2. School completion (**Advancement Rate**)
3. Post-school engagement in employment, education and training (**Engagement Rate**).

There are strong links between attendance, achievement, school completion and participation in employment and further education, post-school. These are important outcomes for the long-term economic and social wellbeing of young people and for national productivity and social cohesion.

## Average school attendance rates for *Learning for Life* students

In 2014, the average attendance rates for primary and secondary students on the program were 91.3 percent and 86.9 percent respectively.

In the same year, the rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on the program was 87.3 percent. This was above the national attendance rate of 83.0 percent for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Years 1 to 10 attending government schools.

## Completing Year 12

Close to seven in ten (68.2 percent) of the students who were on the *Learning for Life* program in 2013 advanced to Year 12 in 2015, while still on the program. Between 2012 and 2015, the program supported over 6,500 highly disadvantaged young Australians to reach Year 12.

National data shows that by age 19, only 60.6 percent of young Australians from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds have completed Year 12 or equivalent.

## Post-school employment and further education

In 2015, 84.2 percent of former *Learning for Life* students who left the program in Years 10, 11 or 12, were engaged in employment, education or training, a year after leaving the program. The rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was 74.2 percent.

Two thirds (65.8 percent) of all former *Learning for Life* students were fully engaged for 35 hours or more per week. Most young people who had not yet secured employment or further education, were actively looking for work and one in six of them was also involved in

volunteer activities. The vast majority of former students were aged between 17 and 19 years.

Nationally, only 58.9 percent of all 24 year old Australians from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are fully engaged in employment or further study. This is well below the figure for former *Learning for Life* students who are also much younger and therefore have had far less time to establish themselves post-school.

## Strong outcomes for highly disadvantaged young Australians

The young people supported on the *Learning for Life* program are highly disadvantaged. However, the short and longer-term outcomes they are achieving are strong. These are helping to set them up for post-school economic and social participation.

Of particular note is the year-on-year improvement in the Attendance, Advancement and Engagement Rates which has been achieved, since The Smith Family developed and began tracking these outcomes in 2012.

## Continuous improvement

Continuous improvement is a critical part of the ongoing implementation and development of *Learning for Life*. Analysis of The Smith Family's nationally unique longitudinal dataset, which includes student outcomes, family demographics and progression through the program, is a critical part of this. Feedback from participants, staff and key stakeholders, as well as external research, is also informing ongoing program evolution.

This has resulted in a number of refinements to the program including:

- More tailored support for particular groups of students and at particular times in their educational journey.
- Changes to the frequency and nature of engagement with families, particularly for those students who are struggling.
- Re-defining the roles of staff working directly with families, including increased role specialisation and reorganising the workforce to provide more targeted and effective support.
- Development of approaches which better support students' career pathways.
- Training for all *Learning for Life* staff on how to work more effectively with highly disadvantaged families and refined induction programs for new staff.

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Refinements to the program's design and implementation will continue to occur to further enhance its effectiveness.

The strong focus on effectiveness and continuous improvement was externally acknowledged in 2016, with the *Learning for Life* program winning the Excellence in Social Impact Measurement Award, presented by the Social Impact Measurement Network of Australia (SIMNA).

## Cost effectiveness

The total average per student cost for providing the *Learning for Life* program to a school student is around \$1,000 per year.

## Conclusion

Australia faces significant educational challenges if it is to remain globally competitive and socially cohesive. Large gaps in educational achievement, based on students' backgrounds, are apparent in the first year of school. These gaps grow as young people move through school, resulting in large proportions of young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds not positively transitioning to employment or further study.

The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program is successfully engaging large numbers of highly disadvantaged young Australians and their families over the long-term, around the shared goal of improving students' educational outcomes.

*Learning for Life* is:

- An early intervention, long-term approach, responsive to the changing educational needs of young people as they move through school.
- Highly targeted.
- Based on the principles of reciprocity, parental engagement and high expectations.
- Measuring educational and employment outcomes for highly disadvantaged young Australians, with year-on-year improvements in these outcomes.
- Cost effective and involves partnerships with individuals, community, schools, business and philanthropy.
- Already being delivered nationally at scale, in 94 communities.

The *Learning for Life* program has been evolving over nearly 30 years. Given its effectiveness and scale, it is making an important contribution to addressing Australia's educational challenge. It could easily be further expanded.



## 2. The importance of education

**There is extensive Australian and international research showing the benefits of education to individuals and nations.**

### Employment, income, health and welfare reliance

Educational attainment is an important predictor of an individual's future employment, health and welfare prospects (Victorian Auditor-General 2012). Young people who attain Year 12 have a greater likelihood of continuing with further study, entering the workforce and being employed throughout most of their adult life (Lamb et al. 2015).

They are also more likely to work in higher skilled occupations and have greater lifetime earnings (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011). People who complete Year 12 receive close to 20 percent higher lifetime earnings than those who leave school early (Cassells et al. 2012).

Year 12 completion is also associated with better health outcomes, a reduced likelihood of welfare dependency and an increased ability to participate in the community (Lamb et al. 2015).

### Early school leavers

Conversely, young people who do not complete Year 12 are at risk of a lifetime of economic and social disadvantage. Compared to Year 12 graduates, young people without this credential are more likely to experience unemployment and be dependent on government welfare benefits (ABS 2011).

Early school leavers who do secure work are more likely to find jobs in a narrow field of occupations and are less likely to access on-the-job training and professional development opportunities (Lamb et al. 2015). This impacts on their earning capacity, makes their employment more precarious and reduces the likelihood of them making career advancements.

### Education in the 21st century

Educational attainment is even more important in the technology-rich global 21st century. A range of low-skilled work is becoming increasingly automated and demand for some higher level skills is growing.

It has been estimated that 75 percent of the fastest growing occupations require Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) skills (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2015). However in Australia, the uptake of STEM subjects in Year 12 is declining, (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2015) as has achievement of technology skills in Years 6 and 10 (ACARA 2015).

### Education and national prosperity

Economic growth and social development are closely related to the skills of a country's population (OECD 2015). Human capital is critical to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and a nation's ability to introduce productivity improvements, innovate and increase its international competitiveness (Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Reform Council 2011). Education is also important to nations for a range of social outcomes, such as community cohesion and the health of the population.

### The economic benefit of improving educational outcomes

The OECD estimates that increasing the average performance of current Australian students on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) by 25 points<sup>1</sup> would have a long-term impact of increasing GDP by approximately 0.5 percentage points per year (OECD 2015). The economic gains would accumulate annually, as higher skilled school leavers become an increasingly larger proportion of the workforce over time (Goss et al. 2016).

<sup>1</sup> In Australia, 35 points on the PISA mathematics scale equates to one year of schooling (Thomson et al. 2013).

## 3. Australia's educational challenge

### Young Australians missing educational milestones

A range of indicators highlight the significant educational challenges facing Australia. About a quarter of all young Australians are not meeting key educational milestones, including in the early years, school and post-school transitions (Lamb et al. 2015).

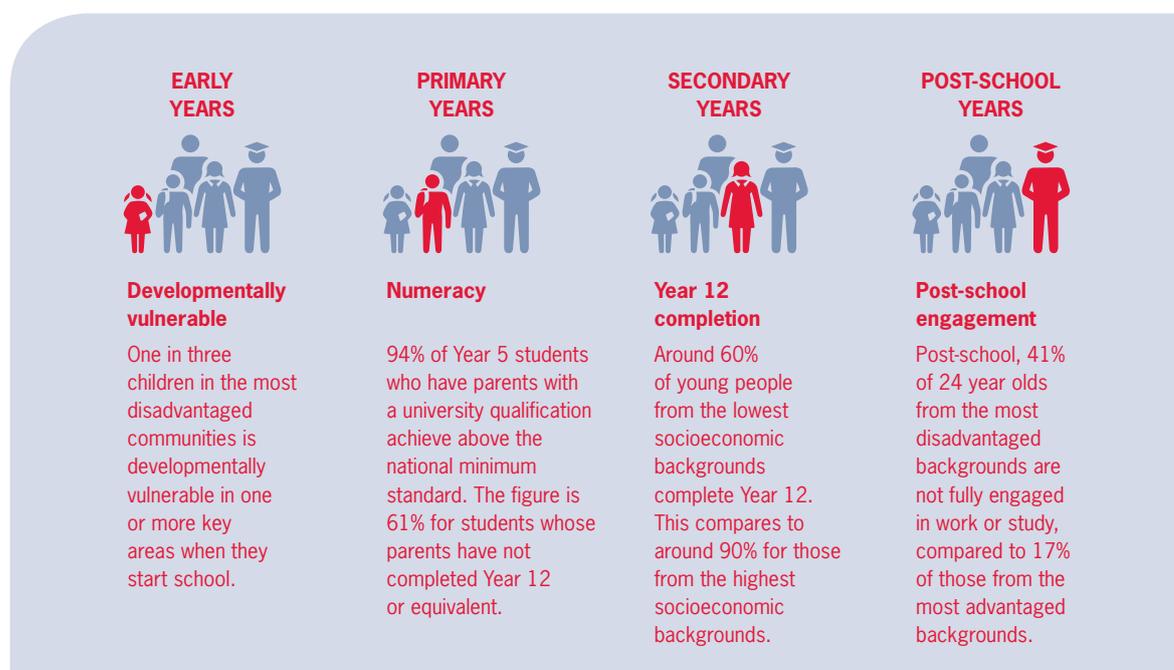
The situation is especially acute for particular groups, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, those living in non-metropolitan areas and those attending schools with a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### Early and ongoing educational disadvantage

Skills development is cumulative, with prior achievement predicting subsequent educational success (Hattie 2009). Academic achievement, as measured by the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), is a major predictor of school completion. Young people, whose academic performance is poor as they progress through school, are at high risk of dropping out of school (OECD 2016).

In Australia, educational disadvantage begins early and continues throughout school and into post-school transitions, as highlighted by the following data and Figure 1.

Figure 1: Disadvantaged young Australians are behind at every stage



Note: Sources are on the following page.

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## Early years

- One in three (32.6 percent) children from Australia's most disadvantaged communities does not meet one or more key developmental milestones in their first year of school.<sup>2</sup> This compares to 15.5 percent of children from the most advantaged communities (Australian Government 2016).

## NAPLAN

- 93.7 percent of Year 5 students from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds are above the national minimum numeracy standard. This compares to 60.5 percent of students from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds (ACARA 2015).
- Just over half (50.5 percent) of Year 7 students whose parents did not complete Year 12, have the core academic skills required to successfully progress through school. This compares to 86.8 percent of students who have a parent with a university degree (Lamb et al. 2015).<sup>3</sup>

## Year 12 completion

- Around 60 percent of young people from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds complete Year 12 or its equivalent by age 19. This compares to around 90 percent of those from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds (Lamb et al. 2015).

## Post-school engagement in work or study

- Only 58.9 percent of 24 year olds from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds are fully engaged in education, training or work. This compares to 83.1 percent of those from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds (Lamb et al. 2015).

## Academic progress

Even when students from disadvantaged backgrounds have the same capabilities as those from advantaged backgrounds, they do not make the same academic progress as they move through school.

By the time students who have high Year 3 NAPLAN scores reach Year 9, those from disadvantaged backgrounds will be one and three quarter years behind their advantaged peers (Goss et al. 2016).

## Location and school matter

Where a young person lives in Australia also influences their educational outcomes. Young people living in non-metropolitan areas achieve at much lower rates than their metropolitan peers. Close to four in five (78.2 percent) 19 year olds living in Australia's metropolitan areas have completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared with less than two in three of those living outside these areas (Lamb et al. 2015).

Data from NAPLAN and the OECD's PISA also shows the negative impact on educational outcomes of a concentration of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in a school. All students, regardless of their personal socioeconomic background, perform considerably poorer in schools where there are high concentrations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Perry & McConney 2010).

## International comparisons

PISA assesses the extent to which 15 year old students have acquired some of the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society. The areas of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy are covered and in particular students' ability to apply these skills to everyday problems and situations (Thomson et al. 2013).

Australia's PISA performance on both the reading and mathematical literacies, significantly declined between 2003 and 2012.<sup>4</sup> While its performance was above the OECD average in both areas in 2012, Australia's rank declined to tenth on reading and seventeenth on mathematics (Thomson et al. 2013).

In mathematics, 42 percent of Australian students performed below the nationally agreed PISA baseline level in 2012 (Thomson et al. 2013). The proportion of students performing poorly grew by a third between 2003 and 2012, while the proportion achieving at high levels declined by a quarter (Goss et al. 2016).

In summary, both national and international data clearly highlight Australia's educational challenge, which begins early and sees many young adults not entering work or study once they leave school.

<sup>2</sup> These milestones are across five key areas of children's development: Physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge (Australian Government 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Based on 2014 NAPLAN Year 7 reading skills (Lamb et al. 2015).

<sup>4</sup> PISA is undertaken every three years. The PISA results for 2015 are not yet available.

## 4. What influences educational outcomes?

**Efforts aimed at improving Australia's educational outcomes, need to be cognisant of the range of factors which influence these outcomes and the approaches which positively impact them.**

### Factors influencing young people's development

A range of factors influence the development of children and young people. These include:

- **Personal characteristics** – such as social skills, intelligence and attitudes.
- **Family** – such as a parent's engagement in their child's learning and the resources the family can access.
- **Peers** – including their attitudes to education, their aspirations and risk-taking behaviour.
- The **institutions** children and young people attend and engage with – including early learning and care settings, school, as well as health and community services.
- The **community** in which they live – the social and economic resources available there, the presence of role models and the level of community cohesion and safety (Bronfenbrenner 1994).

There are links between these factors which also influence young people's development. For example, the relations between home and school, the extent of a family's community networks and how well education and health institutions work together to support children's development.

The values and customs of a society can also influence young people's development. Whether a nation values strong educational outcomes for all young people, as well as the broader economic and social environment, are important.

### Young people's pathways

These factors help shape a child's likely pathway or trajectory through life. Social and family background help to create the conditions for opportunities – or the lack of them – that influence progression through school (OECD 2016).

Young people's pathways, however, are not pre-determined or immutable. Challenges in one area, for example at school, can be offset by additional support in another, for example the family or community, and vice versa. A young person's trajectory can be positively influenced, by providing the support that is needed at the time it is required.



# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

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## Intervene early

Two key principles for positively influencing the outcomes achieved by disadvantaged children and young people are early intervention and long-term support.

The early years of life play a key role in laying the foundations for children’s future learning and lifetime outcomes (McLachlan et al. 2013). Effective learning involves ideas and concepts that build on each other. If children do not acquire crucial skills and knowledge, and develop positive attitudes to learning early on, it can become increasingly difficult for them to learn as they get older (Bailey 2014). School-entry maths skills, for example, are predictive of later maths learning and achievement (Carmichael et al 2013; Duncan et al. 2007).

Concepts that are missed early on, not only limit the development of new skills, but can also negatively impact on children’s motivation to learn (Goss et al. 2016). Supporting young children to acquire foundational skills, and positive attitudes and behaviours to learning, is crucial to setting them up for long-term educational success.

Early intervention goes beyond just providing support in the early years. It also involves addressing issues soon after they are identified, for example, providing additional support for children in primary school who start to fall behind. Intervening early before a problem becomes entrenched is more effective and less costly (Hornell et al. 2006).

## Balanced long-term support

While early intervention is important in improving disadvantaged children’s educational outcomes, if early support is not followed up by later investment, its effect is diminished as children grow (Cunha & Heckman 2007).

Research by Nobel Economist James Heckman and his colleague Flavio Cunha (2007), shows that efforts aimed at improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young people are most cost effective when they involve balanced long-term support across a young person’s life.

Investment distributed over the first two decades of a child’s life, produces more adult skills than the same level of investment focused on one part of a young person’s life, for example the early years or adolescence. A sustained and early intervention approach is also far more cost effective than remedial efforts aimed at preparing adults for the workforce (Cunha & Heckman 2007).

Table 1 outlines the impact of four different investment approaches on disadvantaged children’s high school completion and university enrolment rates, as well as their use of welfare and their criminal convictions. The approaches involve: no intervention; intervention only in early childhood; intervention only in adolescence; and balanced intervention across the full life cycle of a child.

**Table 1: Impact of different investment strategies with disadvantaged children and young people**

	High school graduation rates (%)	University enrolment (%)	Use of welfare (%)	Criminal conviction (%)
No intervention (Baseline)	41	4	18	23
Early childhood intervention only	66	13	9	17
Adolescent intervention only	64	12	10	18
<b>Balanced intervention across full life cycle of a child</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>11</b>

Source: Cunha & Heckman 2007 p. 44.

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Table 1 clearly shows that providing disadvantaged children with balanced support across their lives results in the best outcomes. For the same investment, this approach leads to higher school completion and university enrolment rates, and lower criminal conviction rates and welfare reliance, than investments targeted at either the early years or adolescence.

The data also shows that very positive outcomes **are** possible for disadvantaged children. The balanced approach results in around nine in ten young people completing high school and only three in 100 requiring welfare support. This compares with around four in ten and 18 in 100 respectively, for disadvantaged children who have received no support.

A key dimension of this approach is that it is highly targeted – it deliberately invests in children and young people who, without support, are likely to have poor educational and wellbeing outcomes. This targeted approach contributes to its cost-effectiveness and the wise use of available resources.

## Individual factors that influence educational outcomes

There are a range of individual factors, outside of innate ability, that influence young people's learning outcomes. These include early achievement, attitudes to learning, levels of school attendance and the extent to which students move schools.

### Early achievement and learning characteristics

Early achievement is an important predictor of later educational success. Early low achievers tend to fall further and further behind over time, while initial high performers continue to excel (Goss et al. 2016).

However a range of non-cognitive skills, such as perseverance, motivation and self-esteem, contribute to students being able to make the most of available learning opportunities (OECD 2016). Non-cognitive skills predict later-life outcomes, with the same or greater strength, as measures of cognitive skills (OECD 2014).

When developed in combination, skills such as self-efficacy (an individual's belief that they have the capability to succeed at a particular task), motivation, goal setting, progress monitoring and problem solving, appear to influence improvements in academic learning and success in children and young people (Gutman & Schoon 2013).

### Motivation and perseverance

Unsurprisingly, students who are more motivated to learn achieve higher levels of performance than students with less motivation (OECD 2011). This is in part because students' motivation influences the amount of time and effort they put into improving their performance (OECD 2016).

Perseverance is also important for academic success (OECD 2016). Students who are more persistent learn more (OECD 2014). Having a disposition which focuses on completing goals despite the difficulty involved, a lack of progress and failure, is an essential part of the learning journey.

### Mindsets

Students' belief about their academic abilities can facilitate or hamper their academic performance (OECD 2011). Students who believe their intelligence can be developed (a growth mindset) outperform students who believe their intelligence is fixed (a fixed mindset). Students' perception of their abilities plays a key role in their motivation (Dweck 2015).

PISA data shows that among disadvantaged students, those who believe in their own ability to handle tasks effectively and overcome difficulties, are much more likely to excel in science, than their peers who do not have this self-belief (OECD 2011).

### Developing skills, attitudes and behaviours

Skills – both cognitive and non-cognitive – are not determined solely by genetic factors. They can be shaped, enhanced and changed over the life cycle (OECD 2014). Targeting interventions at the appropriate stage of a person's life, and to influence the skills which are most malleable at that stage, is important. Non-cognitive skills, for example, are more able to be influenced in adolescence, than are cognitive skills (OECD 2014).

Children can be supported to develop a number of the attitudes and behaviours that positively influence educational outcomes. Having children focus on the process that leads to learning, such as hard work or trying new strategies and seeking input from others when they are stuck, can foster a growth mindset (Dweck 2015).

Children and young people can also be taught to set goals, monitor their own progress and understanding, plan and problem solve, know when to use particular learning strategies, and to be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. Several studies show that

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learning these skills and strategies impacts positively on educational performance (McLachlan et al. 2013).

### The importance of school attendance

Analysis of NAPLAN data by Hancock et al. (2013) shows the importance of school attendance for academic achievement. Academic achievement declines as school absence rates increase, with every day of attendance contributing to a child's learning.

The impact of school absences accumulates over time. Absences are related to achievement in numeracy, reading and writing, not only in the year when a child is absent, but in future years as well.

Despite the importance of strong school attendance, attendance gaps between children from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds are obvious from the first year of school. The gap widens as young people progress through school, particularly in high school.

The impact of school absences is greater for some groups of students, such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Children from more advantaged backgrounds tend to have access to resources in the home which, at least in the primary years, helps protect them from the immediate impact of being absent from school.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from improved school attendance across all years of schooling, particularly in the early years. This is in part because a student's initial attendance pattern is a strong predictor of their subsequent school attendance pattern and the earlier good patterns of attendance occur, the greater the likely benefits.

### Student mobility

Recent analysis by the NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation ((CESE) 2015) highlights the impact of moving schools on students' educational outcomes. Students with higher levels of mobility achieve lower NAPLAN reading and numeracy results and are more likely to leave school before completing Year 12.

Mobility can have a particularly negative impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. A student in NSW from a very low socioeconomic background, who experiences three or more moves in their first four years of secondary schooling, has a 65 percent probability of not completing Year 12.

This is around twice that of a similar group of very low socioeconomic background students who did not change school (CESE 2015).

## Family and peer factors

Family and peer factors are important influences on the educational outcomes young people achieve. Students whose parents have higher levels of education and better jobs benefit from accessing a wider range of resources that make it easier for them to succeed in school. These resources take a variety of forms – **financial** (for example computers, books, private tutoring), **cultural** (for example a larger vocabulary,) and **social** (for example role models and networks) (OECD 2016).

## Parental engagement in children's learning

While access to, or lack of, resources can influence educational outcomes, research highlights the critical role of parental engagement in their children's learning. This is especially true for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A recent review by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (Fox & Olsen 2014) identifies the aspects of parental engagement that matter most. These include:

- **Parents' aspirations and expectations** of their children's achievement and participation in further education. These have consistently been identified as the strongest and most influential aspect of parent engagement.
- **Parent-child reading** is particularly important for children in the early years and primary school, for developing skills, confidence and enjoyment of reading and learning.
- **Parents' conversations** with their children can have a strong influence on children's cognitive skills, the value they place on learning and their enjoyment of it.
- Creating a cognitively **stimulating environment** for children. This includes having books and other learning resources in the home, visiting libraries and museums, participating in community events, fostering learning around children's interests and talking about movies and television programs.
- Positive and trusting **parent-teacher relationships** and opportunities for regular communication.

### Outcomes of parental engagement

Parental engagement contributes to a range of short and long-term outcomes for children. It primarily influences children's orientation to learning, including their motivation, engagement, confidence and beliefs about learning (Fox & Olsen 2014).

# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

## The *Learning for Life* program

Parents influence children's beliefs about the importance of education and the extent to which children believe they can influence their academic progress through hard work. Parents also influence children's confidence in their academic ability, the likelihood that they'll seek help if they need it and the acquisition of a range of skills for learning. These include early reading and mathematical skills, problem solving, being an independent learner and linking learning at school to the everyday (Fox & Olsen 2014).

Parental engagement has been shown to have a consistent impact on children's learning outcomes. This is not just in the early years of a child's life. Analysis of data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) highlights the importance of parents and peers on the educational and occupational aspirations of adolescents.

LSAY data shows that parents are an important influence on whether young people complete Year 12, second only to academic achievement at age 15. The data also shows that the most important influencers on whether young people intend to go to university immediately after leaving school, are the perceived expectations of their parents and peers (Gemici et al. 2014).

Students, who at age 15 believe their parents expect them to go to university, are around 11 times more likely to report that they plan to attend university, when compared with students whose parents do not expect them to go to university. Students whose friends plan to attend university are nearly four times more likely to plan to do so, than those whose friends do not envisage going to university (Gemici et al. 2014).

### Parental engagement and disadvantaged families

Despite wanting to be actively engaged in their child's learning, many parents from disadvantaged backgrounds need support to achieve this. They may:

- Lack confidence or be uncertain about how to support their child's learning.
- Have a poor educational history or experience with schools.
- Have limited English language skills.
- Come from a country where the educational system does not encourage parental engagement.

Importantly, 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).

Analysis of LSAY data shows that parental and peer influences almost entirely mediate the effects of gender, Indigeneity, socioeconomic status, location, family structure and immigration background, on young people's educational and occupational aspirations (Gemici et al. 2014).

Both the ARACY review and analysis of LSAY data highlight the clear value of efforts aimed at enhancing the engagement of parents in their child's learning, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Parental engagement in learning is a tool that can help close the gap in achievement between children of different socioeconomic backgrounds (Fox & Olsen 2014). Any policy intervention that successfully leverages the influence of parents and peers may provide a substantial pay-off in terms of raising aspirations (Gemici et al. 2014).

### In-school factors

Not surprisingly, there are a number of in-school factors which impact on young people's educational outcomes. The most important of these is the quality of teaching that students experience. Teachers account for about 30 percent of the variance in student achievement (Hattie 2003). As Professor John Hattie notes, "it is what teachers know, do and care about which is very powerful in the learning equation" (Hattie 2003 p. 2). Teachers' capacity to identify the individual learning needs of their students and adapt or target their teaching to what students are ready to learn, is particularly important (Goss et al. 2015).

### School culture

Schools and principals account for a further five to ten percent of the variance in student achievement (Hattie 2003). A school's culture and environment influence young people's educational achievement.

Schools can promote, develop and sustain a culture where academic success is expected of all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who have performed poorly in previous years (OECD 2016). Schools sometimes, however, respond to students who are not performing well, by lowering their expectations and reducing the scope of the curriculum that is taught. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy with lower expectations leading to poorer performance (OECD 2011). Across the globe, school systems that are high performing expect every student to achieve (OECD 2016).

# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

The *Learning for Life* program

The environment of a school is also important for educational success. Emotionally nurturing environments produce more capable learners (Heckman 2007). Students tend to do well academically when they feel socially connected and at ease at school. Conversely, students who feel out of place in school or lonely, are more likely to disengage from learning and leave school early (OECD 2016).

While in-school factors are important influences on educational achievement, 'beyond-school' factors are even more important. Students themselves account for about 50 percent of the variance in achievement, the home an additional five to ten percent and peers a further five to ten percent (Hattie 2003). Schools are important for developing the skills that matter for human development in the 21st century, but they are far from being the principal source of the growth of these skills (OECD 2014).

## Shared responsibility and collaborative efforts

Given the size of Australia's educational challenge, approaches that go beyond individual student, family and school factors are required to improve the educational outcomes of young Australians, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There is an increasing realisation of the need for shared responsibility and collaborative cross-sectoral and cross-institutional efforts aimed at addressing educational disadvantage.

Chenhall et al. (2011) concluded that improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students required a shifting of responsibility from educators, to include, not only parents, but also the different tiers and areas of government such as health, employment and community services, that respond to the social and economic circumstances of families.

Collaboration – the sharing of effort, knowledge and resources in the pursuit of shared goals – has been identified as playing a central role in the achievement of student learning outcomes (Bentley & Cazaly 2015).

## The importance of data and evidence

Australia has a long history of funding educational programs aimed at ensuring all young Australians achieve. A report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (Rorris et al. 2011) noted that for the financial year 2009-10, a conservative estimate of national aggregate funding of programs to address educational disadvantage was \$4.4 billion.

The report concluded however, that "There were insufficient data available to establish to what extent existing programs are effective in reducing the impact of disadvantage on educational outcomes because few have been evaluated, and fewer still have been evaluated with student outcomes as a focus" (Rorris et al. 2011 p. xvi).

Helme and Lamb (2011) also observed the limitations of the existing evidence base for improving school completion rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. They highlighted that much of the work in this area has been short-term and piecemeal, or not evaluated in a robust way. They identified that there is insufficient longitudinal data that tracks the progress of Indigenous individuals and measures the impacts of different approaches. Finally, they observed that little information is available on the conditions needed, including the resources required, and the facilitators and inhibitors which influence successful implementation.

## Summary

Efforts aimed at improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people in ways which are both sustainable and scalable, need to take account of the range of complex and interconnected factors that influence these outcomes. There is no simple, short-term response, but improvements are possible. Early intervention and balanced long-term support are key. Initiatives need to be evidenced-informed and evaluated through the capture of outcomes data which are monitored over time.

## 5. The *Learning for Life* program

**The Smith Family is a national charity with a mission to create opportunities for disadvantaged young Australians, by providing long-term support for their participation in education. The goal is to enable them to participate economically and socially in the Australian community. The Smith Family's largest and most comprehensive program is its *Learning for Life* scholarship program.**

### From welfare support to education

The *Learning for Life* program commenced close to 30 years ago in response to two key prompts:

- Research showing the key role education plays in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and intergenerational poverty.
- Consultations with families supported through The Smith Family's welfare programs, identified that they would highly value assistance with their children's education.

Research and client feedback combined to shift The Smith Family's focus from providing welfare support to families, to improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people.

### Long-term approach

Research on what impacts educational outcomes guided the program's original design and continues to shape its ongoing refinement, as does the experience gained from implementing the program over many years.

Given the importance of early intervention and balanced long-term support for improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young people, students can begin on the *Learning for Life* program in the first year of school and continue through to the completion of tertiary education.<sup>5</sup>

### Parental engagement and high expectations

Parental engagement and a shared commitment to improving children's outcomes are central to the program. Families enter into a Partnership Agreement

with The Smith Family, which acknowledges a shared goal of supporting the student's long-term participation in education.

The principles of mutual responsibility and high expectations regarding school attendance, school completion and post-school engagement in employment or further education, underpin the agreement. The agreement formally acknowledges the value of parental engagement in their child's learning. This is particularly important given most parents have not completed Year 12, some parents' own educational experience and engagement with school may not have been ideal, and some may underestimate the importance of their role in their child's education.

### Accountability

As part of the Partnership Agreement, parents commit to spending the funds provided on their child's education-related expenses,<sup>6</sup> as well as providing school reports to The Smith Family so attendance and progress can be monitored. These reports also help staff to provide more targeted support to students and families who are experiencing additional difficulties, and encouragement, when good progress is being made.

Describing the program as a scholarship, rather than a welfare initiative, helps engender a sense of pride and achievement in being selected for the program, as well as reinforcing its focus on education.



<sup>5</sup> The Smith Family also implements the *Let's Read* and *Let's Count* programs with children, families, early years educators and community members. These help foster young children's early reading and early mathematics skills and attitudes, prior to them starting school.

<sup>6</sup> This includes keeping supporting documentation that shows funds were spent on educational expenses.

# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

The *Learning for Life* program

## Components of *Learning for Life*

The *Learning for Life* program has three integrated components that provide financial, relational and programmatic support as shown in Figure 2:

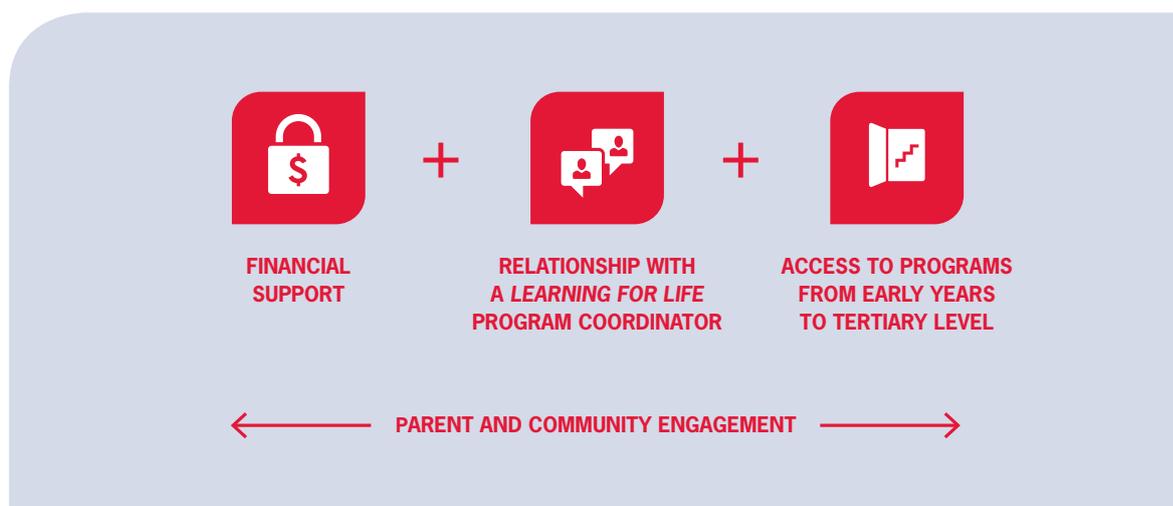
- A modest **biannual payment** is made to families to help them cover education-related expenses, such as books, uniforms and excursions. The funds are used to help students access resources and participate in activities that are core to the educational development of all young people. This also helps them feel more socially connected and at ease at school. For school students, the payment ranges from just over \$500 to less than \$800 per year, depending on the student's year level.
- A *Learning for Life* **Program Coordinator** (The Smith Family staff member) who works with the family to support their child's long-term participation in education. The Coordinator helps the family overcome any barriers to school attendance, engagement and achievement that their child may face. The Coordinator also works in partnership with schools to recruit and support families, deliver education-focused programs and contribute to creating positive learning environments.
- Access to a **range of short programs** that begin in the early years and continue through to the tertiary level. Students develop the skills, knowledge,

attitudes and behaviours that support long-term educational achievement. The programs include literacy and numeracy programs, learning clubs, mentoring and career activities. They target different stages of a young person's life as well as providing support to their parents around digital and financial literacy skills, as shown in Figure 3. Further information on some of these programs is included in the Appendices.

As Figure 2 highlights, the *Learning for Life* program is underpinned by both parental and community engagement. The latter involves extensive partnerships with schools and other educational institutions, corporates, non-government and philanthropic organisations. These partnerships harness diverse resources and supports, coordinated to achieve the shared goal of improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young people.

Community engagement also includes the more than 8,700 volunteers and the over 16,000 members of VIEW Clubs, who annually support the work of The Smith Family, including as mentors and tutors. These volunteers help widen the networks of support and advice that students can draw on, especially around careers, employment pathways and academic achievement. Volunteers also facilitate the delivery of a range of programs.

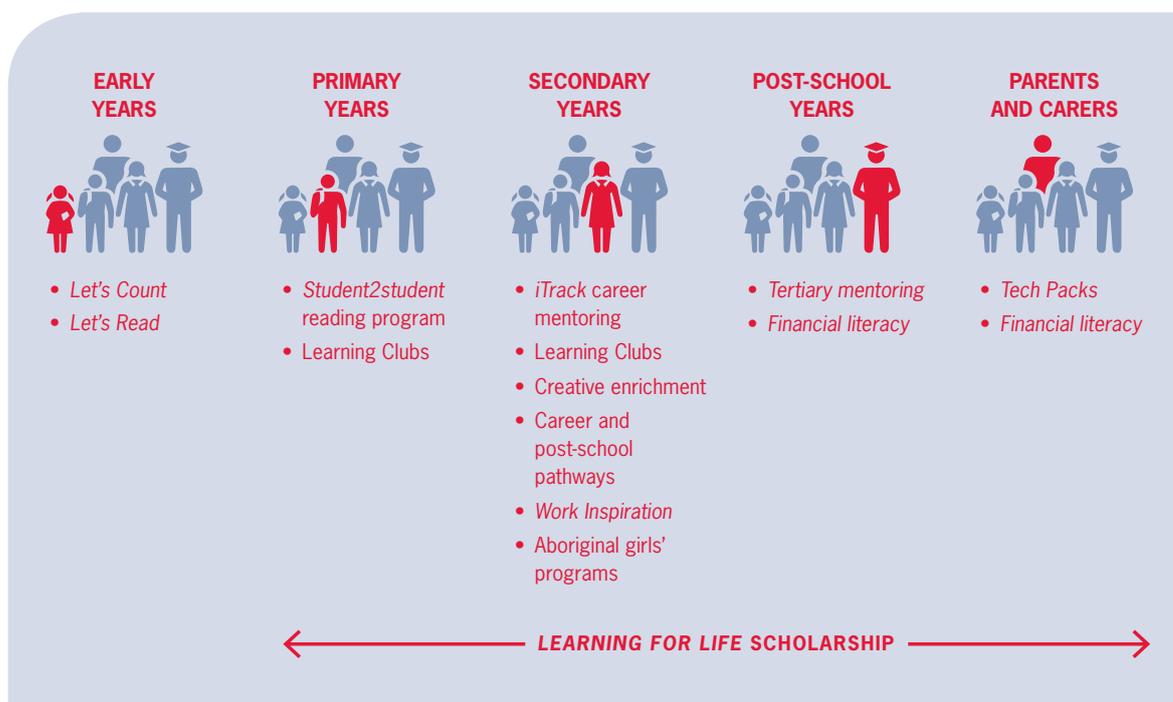
**Figure 2: The components of the *Learning for Life* scholarship**



# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

The *Learning for Life* program

**Figure 3: Key short programs at different life stages that are part of *Learning for Life***



The vast majority of the 34,000 students on *Learning for Life* are supported by individual sponsors. These sponsors are able to correspond with their student, via The Smith Family, and this can contribute to students' ongoing educational engagement and motivation.

Community engagement recognises that where a child lives influences their educational and wellbeing outcomes. It acknowledges that no single organisation will have all the resources and expertise required to improve the long-term outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians. This approach contributes to more efficient and effective support of young people, particularly in disadvantaged communities, reducing the likelihood of gaps or duplication in meeting young people's needs.

## Recruiting and selecting students

Recruitment for *Learning for Life* is done through partnerships with hundreds of schools in disadvantaged communities across Australia. The vast majority of *Learning for Life* students attend government schools, with a very small proportion attending non-government schools.

Schools refer families who they think would benefit from the program to The Smith Family. The aim and guidelines of *Learning for Life* are then explored through discussions The Smith Family staff have with these families.

The key criteria for recruiting families onto the *Learning for Life* program are:

- They must be **low income**, as evidenced by them having a Government Health Care Card or being on a pension.
- Their child is attending a **partner school** in one of 94 disadvantaged communities across Australia in which The Smith Family works. A list of these communities is included in the Appendices.
- They agree to enter into a **Family Partnership Agreement** which acknowledges a shared commitment to the student's participation in education.

While students are recruited from partner schools they can continue on the program even if they move to another non-partner school or community. This ensures that long-term support is provided even when students are mobile.

# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

The *Learning for Life* program

## 'Beyond school' support

*Learning for Life* focuses on providing support that **complements**, but is **in addition**, to what is offered by schools. It seeks to influence students' 'beyond school' learning environments, given the evidence of how important these are, particularly for disadvantaged children and young people. This includes learning environments in the home and community.

The vast majority of the short programs that are part of *Learning for Life* and shown in Figure 3, take place outside of school hours.

Some programs occur in the home, some on school premises after hours, while others are run in other community and institutional settings. These include community centres, libraries, universities and workplaces, for programs focusing on career pathways.

In addition to helping students develop a range of skills necessary for educational success, the short programs help to reinforce for students and families that learning occurs in multiple settings.

## The scale of *Learning for Life*

Around 34,000 children and young people are supported on the program each year. They live in 18,000 families, with multiple children in some families being supported. Around 15,000 of those on *Learning for Life* are in primary school, 18,000 in secondary school and 1,200 in tertiary education. Equal proportions of female and male students are supported.

Around 6,000 (18 percent) of students on *Learning for Life* are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, an increase of around three percent since 2012-13. The Smith Family has deliberately sought to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on the program, as part of its Reconciliation Action Plan, given the poorer educational outcomes generally achieved by this group of young Australians.

The *Learning for Life* program runs in every state and territory as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Students on the *Learning for Life* scholarship program by state and territory, 2014-15**

State or Territory	Number of students on the <i>Learning for Life</i> scholarship
Australian Capital Territory	969
New South Wales	10,627
Northern Territory	286
Queensland	7,023
South Australia	3,873
Tasmania	521
Victoria	7,671
Western Australia	3,126
<b>Total</b>	<b>34,096</b>

# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

The *Learning for Life* program

## Targeting young people who need support

The *Learning for Life* program targets young people who are likely to have poor educational outcomes unless they are provided with additional support. Research shows that after controlling for differences in school achievement, there are a range of individual and family characteristics associated with differences in educational outcomes.

On average, young people who live in families in which there is parental unemployment and lower levels of parental education, or who come from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, tend to have lower rates of school attendance from the first year of school, poorer academic achievement and lower Year 12 attainment than their peers (Hancock et al. 2013; Lamb et al. 2015).

As a group, the profile of students on *Learning for Life* is:

- **Family structure** – over half live in a single parent family. A further six percent live with their grandparents, with other family members or are in foster care.
- **Disability or health issue** – 40 percent of students and 50 percent of parents/carers have a health or disability issue.
- **Parental education** – 60 percent have a parent/carer who has not completed Year 12.

- **Parental employment** – over 70 percent have a parent/carer who is not in paid employment.
- **Student mobility** – One in five (20 percent) students in Years 5 to 12 has attended four or more schools and one in twenty has been at six or more schools.

## Learning for Life students and their peers

The above information on *Learning for Life* students and their families, highlights that the program is targeting young people who are at risk of poor educational outcomes. Comparing *Learning for Life* students with their peers in the same schools further emphasises this.

Table 3 compares *Learning for Life* students attending disadvantaged schools in New South Wales, with their peers in the same schools. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) classifies all of these schools as disadvantaged.

As Table 3 shows, compared to students in the same schools, *Learning for Life* students are:

- More likely to be of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.
- Far less likely to have a parent who has completed Year 12 or university.
- Far less likely to have a parent who is employed.

**Table 3: *Learning for Life* students in New South Wales compared with their peers in disadvantaged schools**

Characteristic	Total school population* (%)	<i>Learning for Life</i> students in the same schools* (%)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds	14	25
Parent/carer Year 12 completion or post-school education**	80	39
Parent/carer university education***	13	3
Parent/carer employed	79	18

Note: \*Sample of 50 low socioeconomic schools with 30 or more *Learning for Life* students. \*\*Post-school education includes: Certificates I - IV; Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Associate Degree; Bachelor Degree; Graduate Diploma, Graduate Certificate; Postgraduate Degree.\*\*\*Bachelor Degree or higher. The NSW Department of Education and Communities provided data in 2014 to enable this analysis.

# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

## The *Learning for Life* program

Table 3 shows that less than one in five (18 percent) *Learning for Life* students in New South Wales has a parent who is employed. This compares with around four in five (79 percent) of their peers in the same school. The very low level of employment amongst *Learning for Life* families is perhaps not surprising, given the high proportion who experience disability or health issues. It does however flag that children in these families are very likely to require additional support to achieve educationally.

Analysis of data from other state jurisdictions reinforces the findings contained in Table 3 – as a group, *Learning for Life* students are more disadvantaged than their peers, even in disadvantaged schools. The program is targeting, and importantly reaching, young people who are at risk of poor educational outcomes.

### Average length of time on *Learning for Life*

Students on *Learning for Life* who are in secondary school or tertiary education have been on the program,

on average, for six years or more. This is significant, given research highlights the importance of providing long-term support for disadvantaged young people across different stages of their development. It is also a significant achievement of the program that families remain committed to their child's education despite the significant level of disadvantage, disability, illness and mobility they experience.

### Per student program cost

The total average cost for providing the *Learning for Life* program to a school student is around \$1,000 per year. The vast majority of funds used by The Smith Family to deliver the program is sourced from non-government sources. This includes donations from individual Australians, as well as funds from corporates, Trusts and Foundations.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> The Western Australian Government is providing \$360,000 for the program per year.

## 6. Outcomes of the *Learning for Life* program

### Outcomes Based Accountability

The Smith Family uses the Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) framework to assess and track the short and longer-term outcomes being achieved by students on the *Learning for Life* program. The OBA framework uses three key questions to help organisations assess program performance:

1. **Quantity**  
How much the program delivered? (for example how many students were supported).
2. **Quality**  
How well was it delivered? (for example how many students finished the program).
3. **Outcomes and impact**  
Is anyone better off? (for example what proportion of students improved their reading age or completed Year 12).

The Smith Family collects data across all three of these areas – quantity, quality and impact – with the most important being the outcomes achieved by program participants.

### Tracking student progress

Each student on the *Learning for Life* program has a unique student identifier which enables their individual progress to be tracked over time. Demographic and outcomes data is collected on all students and entered into a purpose built database. This allows for systematic analysis of the progress and outcomes being achieved by both individual students and different groups of students, such as those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. This helps identify where additional student support or program refinements may be required.

### Short-term outcomes

Students who participate on the *Learning for Life* scholarship access a range of short programs that help support their educational achievement and engagement (see Figure 3). These target different stages of a

young person's educational journey through school and include after-school learning clubs, reading programs, mentoring and career activities. More information on some of these programs is included in the Appendices.

The OBA framework is used to measure a range of outcomes for these programs, including increases in students' reading age, school engagement, motivation, confidence, knowledge of careers and post-school pathways and changes in behaviours. The focus on both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes is important given research showing the contribution both make to long-term educational success.

### Three key longer-term outcomes

The short-term outcomes identified above, are the foundations or stepping stones for the achievement of three longer-term outcomes that The Smith Family is tracking for participants of the *Learning for Life* program. These outcomes have been measured since 2012 and are:

1. School attendance (**Attendance Rate**).
2. School completion (**Advancement Rate**).
3. Post-school engagement in employment, education and training (**Engagement Rate**).

These outcomes were chosen because of their research, policy and practice relevance. As identified in earlier sections of this report, research shows the clear links between attendance, achievement, school completion and post-school participation in employment, education and training. These outcomes are important for the long-term economic and social wellbeing of young people.

The three longer-term outcomes are policy relevant as they are included in the COAG *National Education Agreement 2009*. They are also of relevance to the Closing the Gap agreement, which seeks to reduce the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other Australians, across a range of key educational areas.

The outcomes are practice relevant to the *Learning for Life* program, as they directly relate to its aims and how it is implemented by The Smith Family.

# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

The *Learning for Life* program

The relationship between the short and longer-term outcomes is shown in Figure 4.

## Average school attendance rates for *Learning for Life* students

Table 4 shows the average school attendance rates of *Learning for Life* students for each year from 2012 through to 2014. The data is provided for both primary and secondary school students and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The 2014 rates are 91.3 percent, 86.9 percent and 87.3 percent respectively.

## National comparisons

There is no national data available on the school attendance rates of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. This means there is no data which is directly comparable with the attendance rates of *Learning for Life* students shown in Table 4.

However in 2014:

- The national student attendance rate for **all** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Years 1 to 10 attending government schools was 83.0 percent (SCRGSP 2016). This is below the rate of *Learning for Life* students for all three years from 2012 to 2014.

- The national student attendance rate for students in Years 7 to 10 in **all** government schools was 89.6 percent (SCRGSP 2016). While this is slightly above the rate for *Learning for Life* students in secondary school, the national rate includes students from **all** socioeconomic backgrounds, whereas students on *Learning for Life* are from highly disadvantaged backgrounds and experience high rates of ill health, disability and mobility.
- The average attendance rate of *Learning for Life* students in Year 10 was 85.4 percent. For Year 10 students in **all** government schools, the average attendance rate was 84.9 percent in Western Australia, 87.1 percent in Queensland, and 88.1 percent in NSW (SCRGSP 2016). The state rates again include students from **all** socioeconomic backgrounds.

## Completing Year 12

Year 12 completion is associated with better employment, income and health outcomes and a reduced likelihood of welfare dependency. The Smith Family's Advancement Rate measures the proportion of Year 10 *Learning for Life* students who advance to Year 12 or equivalent<sup>8</sup> while still on the scholarship. As this measure tracks individual student's progress over time

**Figure 4: Relationship between the short and longer-term outcomes of the *Learning for Life* program**



<sup>8</sup> COAG (2012) defined 'Year 12 equivalent' as being Certificate II or above up until 2015 and Certificate III or above after 2015.

# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

The *Learning for Life* program

**Table 4: Average school attendance rates for *Learning for Life* students, 2012 to 2014**

Students	2012 (%)	2013 (%)	2014 (%)
Primary school	90.4	91.2	91.3
Secondary school	84.6	86.0	86.9
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	85.2	86.9	87.3

Note: In line with national data collection practices, this data is for students in Years 1 to 10.

it is referred to as a longitudinal measure. Longitudinal measures have the highest degree of accuracy as they follow the individual journey that students make as they progress through school and beyond (ABS 2010).

Table 5 identifies the Advancement Rates of *Learning for Life* students who were in Year 10 in either 2010, 2011, 2012 or 2013. Of *Learning for Life* students who were in Year 10 in 2010, 59.6 percent advanced to Year 12 in 2012 while still on the scholarship.

For those who were in Year 10 in 2013, close to seven in ten (68.2 percent) advanced to Year 12 while still on scholarship in 2015. There has been a significant improvement in the Advancement Rates achieved across these years. The 2013 – 2015 rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was 62.2 percent.

Table 5 also shows that between 2012 and 2015, over 6,500 highly disadvantaged Australian students were supported by the *Learning for Life* program to advance to Year 12.



## National comparisons

There is no national data that directly monitors student transitions throughout the course of their education (ABS 2010 p. 15). This makes comparisons with The Smith Family's Advancement Rate, which is both national and a direct measure, difficult.

Australia has a number of measures of school completion that are reported on by various government agencies. The main approach is based on population estimates and aggregated school enrolment data.

The other widely used measure for reporting Year 12 completion relies on self-reported responses to surveys conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, such as the five-yearly Census. This data is available in broad age groups, such as 15 to 19 year olds or 20 to 24 year olds.

These are all indirect measures because they are not tracking the progress of each individual student. The ABS views direct measures of student transitions as preferable (ABS 2010 p. 23).

Lamb et al. (2015) have analysed one of the indirect measures of school completion by the socioeconomic background of students. This indicates that by age 19, 60.6 percent of young people from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds had completed Year 12 or equivalent. This is well below the 2013 – 2015 Advancement Rate of 68.2 percent for students on the *Learning for Life* program. Students who are included in the Advancement Rate are also slightly younger than age 19.

# Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians:

The *Learning for Life* program

**Table 5: The Advancement Rates of students on the *Learning for Life* program**

2010 – 2012		2011 – 2013		2012 – 2014		2013 – 2015		Total number of Year 12 students 2012 – 2015
Advancement rate (%)	Number of students							
59.6	1,455	62.5	1,662	63.2	1,645	68.2	1,778	6,540

## Post-school employment, education and training

The third long-term outcome that The Smith Family is tracking for *Learning for Life* students is their participation in employment, education or training after they leave the program. The Engagement Rate survey reports on the extent to which *Learning for Life* students who left the program in Years 10, 11 or 12, are involved in employment, education or training, a year after leaving the program.

The Engagement Rate survey is undertaken every two years through a telephone interview of former *Learning for Life* students. Table 6 shows that in 2013, 79.6 percent of former students were engaged in employment, education or training, a year after leaving the program. In 2015, the rate had increased to 84.2 percent for all former students and 74.2 percent for those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

For the 15.8 percent of former students in 2015 who were not yet engaged in employment, education or training, four in five were actively looking for work and one in six had volunteered in the last four weeks.



## National comparisons

Most (84 percent) of the young people included in the 2015 Engagement Rate were aged between 17 to 19 years. National measures of post-school engagement rely on ABS surveys or the national population Census which is conducted every five years. They also tend to report on a different age range than The Smith Family's Engagement Rate, making direct comparisons difficult.

Lamb et al. (2015) report on the proportion of Australians aged 24 who are fully engaged in employment, education and training. For young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, 58.9 percent were fully engaged. This is well below The Smith Family's 2015 fully engaged rate of 65.8 percent, which is also for a younger group.

The Steering Committee for the Review of Government Services Provision ((SCRGSP) 2016) estimates that in 2014, 73.0 percent of all school leavers aged 15 to 24 years were fully engaged in employment, education and training. While this is above the 2015 Engagement Rate it includes young people from **all** socioeconomic backgrounds and covers a much wider age range.

## Strong outcomes and continuous improvement

The young people being supported by the *Learning for Life* program are highly disadvantaged. They are however achieving strong short and longer-term outcomes. Of particular note is that there has been year-on-year improvement in all three of the longer-term outcomes The Smith Family has been tracking since 2012.

A focus on continuous improvement is a critical part of the ongoing implementation and development of *Learning for Life*. Analysis of student outcomes, feedback from participants, staff and key stakeholders, as well as external research, are being used to inform the program's evolution.

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**Table 6: Engagement in employment, education and training of former *Learning for Life* students**

	Overall Engagement Rate (%)	Fully engaged* in employment, education or training (%)	Partly engaged* in employment, education or training (%)
<b>2013</b>			
All students	79.6	61.7	17.9
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	69.7	56.1	13.6
<b>2015</b>			
All students	84.2	65.8	18.4
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	74.2	54.6	19.6

\*Fully engaged means participation in employment, education and/or training for 35 hours a week or more. Partly engaged means participation in these activities for less than 35 hours a week.

The Smith Family's continuous improvement approach has resulted in a number of recent refinements to the program including:

- More tailored support for particular groups of students and at particular times in the educational journey. This includes those who are struggling with school attendance, students transitioning to high school or senior secondary school and students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.
- Changes to the frequency and nature of engagement with families, particularly taking account of those students who need additional support.
- Re-defining the roles of staff working directly with families, including increased role specialisation and reorganising the structure of the workforce in order to provide more targeted and effective support.
- The development of approaches which better support students' career pathways.

- Training for all *Learning for Life* staff on how to work more effectively with highly disadvantaged families and refined induction programs for new staff.

It is anticipated that there will be further refinements to the program's design and implementation in order to enhance its ongoing effectiveness. This will be in response to the continued analysis of student data and the outcomes they are achieving, discussions with key stakeholders, including young people and their families, and in response to new research and changing external circumstances.

The strong focus on effectiveness and continuous improvement was externally acknowledged in 2016, with the *Learning for Life* program winning the Excellence in Social Impact Measurement Award, presented by the Social Impact Measurement Network of Australia (SIMNA).

## 7. Conclusion

Australia faces significant educational challenges if it is to remain globally competitive and socially cohesive.

Large gaps in educational achievement, based on students' backgrounds, are apparent in the first year of school. These gaps grow as young people move through school, resulting in large proportions of young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds not transitioning to employment or further study.

This places them at risk of lifetime economic and social disadvantage. It is also a huge loss to the nation.

The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program is successfully engaging large numbers of highly disadvantaged young Australians and their families over the long-term, around the shared goal of improving students' educational outcomes.

*Learning for Life* is:

- An early intervention, long-term approach, responsive to the changing educational needs of young people as they move through school.

- Highly targeted.
- Based on the principles of reciprocity, parental engagement and high expectations.
- Improving educational and employment outcomes for highly disadvantaged young Australians, with year-on-year improvements in these outcomes being achieved.
- Cost effective and involves partnerships with individuals, community, schools, business and philanthropy.
- Already being delivered nationally at scale in 94 communities.

The *Learning for Life* program has been evolving over nearly 30 years. Given its effectiveness and scale, it is making an important contribution to addressing Australia's educational challenge. The program could easily be further expanded.



## Appendices

### Appendix 1

**As part of the *Learning for Life* scholarship, students can participate in a range of short programs that help build the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours needed for long-term educational success and achievement. The programs are targeted to students' different needs and stages, as they move through school. This section provides details on three of these programs – *student2student*, *Learning Clubs* and *iTrack*.**

#### *Student2student*

Reading is a core skill and young people who do not do well in this area are more likely to become disengaged in school and struggle to complete Year 12.

*Student2student* is an early intervention peer reading program, targeting children in Years 3 to 8, who are up to two years behind in their reading. It matches them with trained reading 'buddies' who are good readers and at least two years older. The pair connect over the phone or online, two to three times a week for an 18 week period. The child reads to their buddy from books, which are provided by The Smith Family, and appropriate to the student's reading level. The program usually takes place at home at a time which suits the reader and buddy.

*Student2student* improves children's reading skills, confidence and motivation. In 2015, analysis of data for 728 students who completed the program, showed that 95 percent had increased their reading age. Seven in ten (71 percent) students increased their reading age by more than six months.

One hundred and twenty six students who completed the program were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and their outcomes were similarly strong, with three quarters (76 percent) of them increasing their reading age by more than six months.

Nine out of ten students who completed a post-program survey also indicated that they were reading more often and were enjoying reading more since participating in *student2student*.

#### *Learning Clubs*

*Learning Clubs* are a safe and supportive out-of-school learning environment, where students can access resources and participate in activities, that enhance their academic skills and support their engagement in education. Activities vary depending on students' needs but include providing homework support or focusing on improving students' reading or other skills that are important for learning.

*Learning Clubs* run for a minimum of two terms each year, with students attending once or twice a week at no cost. They take place both on school premises and in community settings.

Students can access trained volunteers at the club who have the skills and knowledge to support learning. There is a low student-to-volunteer ratio, with volunteers coming from a range of backgrounds, including pre-service and retired teachers.

Over 225 *Learning Clubs* are provided by The Smith Family in communities across Australia. The vast majority are for students in the primary years, given the importance of early intervention. In 2015, around 4,500 students participated in these *Learning Clubs*.

Students identify that participating in *Learning Clubs* has a range of educational benefits:

- Helps them improve in areas such as reading and spelling and perform better in class.
- Helps them finish their homework as there is a quiet space and tutor support.
- Teaches them to ask for help when they don't understand, to try harder at school and persist with their learning, even when it is challenging.
- Makes them feel welcome and that they belong.

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## In the words of the students:

*I can get help if I need it.*

*It helps me get better at reading and I understand more words.*

*They help me with my homework when I'm struggling.*

*I get to spend time with my friends while working and discovering new things.*

*I feel like I belong and feel safe here.*

*It gives me time to do my homework independently and gives me quiet time because at home it is never quiet.*

## Teachers of students who participate in the Learning Clubs identify that attendance has a range of positive impacts:

*There's an increased desire to attend school and participate.*

*They have learnt skills they can use in the classroom. They now find school enjoyable because of the successes they have at the Learning Club.*

*I've seen their confidence build to the point that they show greater participation in class and they take pride in their progress.*

*It's given them a sense of how persistence can be rewarded.*

*They're happier to participate in group activities. They don't fear failure.*

*They're more positive about tackling tasks and less inclined to think the task is too hard.*

## iTrack

iTrack is a mentoring program for students in Years 9 to 11. Students are matched with a supportive adult, who provides advice and guidance about workplace, study and career opportunities. The program helps extend the networks of advice that participants can draw on, at a key time in their lives. This is important given many of the students' parents may not be in employment or have undertaken post-school education.

The mentoring relationship is developed online through weekly chat sessions of approximately an hour a week. These sessions take place for around 18 weeks or two school terms.

The volunteer mentors are drawn from The Smith Family's corporate and community partners. Mentors are matched, where possible, according to the student's career aspirations. The mentors are screened and trained, with the chat sessions monitored through The Smith Family's purpose built online platform.

In 2014 over 800 students from across Australia participated in iTrack. Around 80 percent of students who completed the program indicated that it:

- Motivated them to try harder at school.
- Inspired them to go on to further study.
- Increased their knowledge on what steps to take to achieve their career goals.

Close to nine in ten students also indicated that their mentor had given them more ideas about post-school plans, increased their knowledge about how to reach their career goals and helped them be more positive about their career and study options.

## In the words of the students:

*She really helped me make up my mind and choose what I wanted to do after I leave school.*

*I've been able to manage my study plan time and my marks have increased. I'm feeling more positive with myself in going to uni, and have put in for a job as well as work experience.*

*I now understand the things I need to do in order to complete my schooling and go to university.*

*I have been able to write up a proper resume and have more confidence to go out and look for a job, and my mentor has made me want to try harder at school.*

*Having that extra support from someone I have never met, knowing that he had my back throughout each and every session and being able to relate to my mentor with everything.*

*After missing quite some time off school due to an injury, my mentor got me back on track and feeling positive about school again and my studies, to get me to where I want to be in the future.*

*I could tell her anything and I could trust that she would tell me her honest opinion of my choices at school and help me become a better student and person.*

## Summary

The short programs that are part of the *Learning for Life* scholarship, offer students the opportunity to attain or further develop, key skills and knowledge that are important for long-term educational success. These include: academic skills, such as reading; knowledge of career pathways and employment opportunities; confidence and persistence; and planning and problem solving skills. The outcomes of these programs help build the foundations for students achieving The Smith Family's three longer-term outcomes of school attendance, school completion and employment and further study, post-school.

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## Appendix 2

The Smith Family delivers programs in 94 communities across all states and territories.

<b>Total number of communities: 94</b>			
<b>ACT: 3</b>	Southern Wollongong	Ipswich	<b>VIC: 13</b>
Belconnen	Springfield	Logan	Bairnsdale/Lakes Entrance
Gungahlin	Tamworth	Mackay and Sarina	Ballarat
Tuggeranong	Taree	Maroochydore	Bendigo
	Tarrawanna	Redlands	Brimbank
<b>NSW: 33</b>	Tolland	Rockhampton	Broadmeadows
Alexandria	Tuggerah Lakes	Southport	Churchill
Ashmont	Wiley Park	Toowoomba	Collingwood
Auburn	Windale	Torres Strait	Dandenong
Blue Haven	Wyong	Townsville	Epping
Buninyong			Geelong
Chester Hill	<b>NT: 7</b>	<b>SA: 10</b>	Morwell
Claymore	Alice Springs	Christie Downs	Shepparton
Coffs Harbour	Borroloola	Elizabeth Downs	Werribee
Cranebrook	Darwin	Elizabeth Vale	
Dapto	Katherine	Hackham	<b>WA: 6</b>
Dubbo	Palmerston	Morphett Vale	Collie
Fairfield	Ramingining	Port Adelaide Enfield	Gosnells
Goulburn	Tiwi Islands	Port Augusta	Kwinana
Jesmond		Salisbury North	Midland
Lithgow	<b>QLD: 18</b>	Smithfield Plains	Mirrabooka
Macquarie Fields	Brighton	Whyalla	Pilbara
Miller	Brisbane		
Mount Druitt	Caboolture	<b>TAS: 4</b>	
Nowra	Cairns	Bridgewater/Gagebrook	
Orange	Cape York	Burnie/Wynyard	
Raymond Terrace and Karuah	Coolangatta	Chigwell/Claremont	
Seven Hills	Coomera	North Eastern Launceston	
Shellharbour	Inala		

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“Throughout primary school and high school, knowing there was someone there to help me, it just made things so much easier. I never missed a school camp. I was always in a school uniform, always had the proper books and equipment that I needed for school”.

Kacie, *Learning for Life* student

“Sponsorship came at a really tough time for us. We were in crisis accommodation and the boys were unsettled. Sponsorship meant school was the constant thing in their life that wasn’t changing all the time”.

Alexandrea, mother of *Learning for Life* students Brandon and Raymond

“Nobody I knew – not a family friend or a distant relative – had been to university...I desperately wanted to study at university and the *Learning for Life* program helped me to finish high school, but The Smith Family understood that wasn’t the end of our journey”.

Emma, *Learning for Life* tertiary graduate

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**The Smith Family** Research Report  
2016



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