

Australian Capital Territory Government

Submission to the Literacy and Numeracy Expert Panel

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Contact:
Anne Hampshire
Head of Research and Advocacy
Anne.Hampshire@thesmithfamily.com.au
0417 297 364

The Smith Family
PO Box 10500
Woden ACT 2606

Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide a short submission to the ACT Literacy and Numeracy Education Expert Panel. This submission draws on our experience and research over many years working with children, young people and their families experiencing disadvantage to achieve educationally.

The Smith Family is a national charity which has supported Australian children and families experiencing disadvantage for more than a century. Our **vision** is a world where every child has the opportunity to change their future. Our **belief** is that education is one of the world's most powerful change agents and our **purpose** is to overcome educational inequality caused by poverty. We therefore warmly welcome commentary indicating **“equity is the ACT Government's highest priority in education.”**

We take a **place-based approach** and are working in over 90 low SES communities across every state and territory, including Belconnen, Gungahlin and Tuggeranong in the ACT. Our work is informed by the **ecological model** which identifies the multiple influences on children's educational and life outcomes. We work in **partnership** with children, young people and their families, schools¹, other educational institutions, philanthropy, non-government organisations, business, Governments and the broader community.

The children and young people we support

In FY23, we supported nearly **200,000** children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals nationally through our education-focused programs. This includes over 160,000 children and young people, of whom around **63,000** accessed the multiple benefits of our largest program, the **Learning for Life** educational scholarship. Further information on this program is in the Appendix.

We support around **5,000** children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals in the ACT each year. This includes over **2,100** students on the **Learning for Life** scholarship program. Our work has a strong focus on supporting **parental engagement** in their children's learning, given how important this is for children's outcomes. Parent/carers of *Learning for Life* students enter into a Family Partnership Agreement with The Smith Family around a shared commitment to supporting their child to achieve educationally.

The importance of literacy, numeracy and digital skills

The Smith Family welcomes the ACT Government's focus on **literacy** and **numeracy**. As we noted in our recent submission to the national **Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System**, these **skills** remain **critical** for all young people and there is considerable evidence of the **long-term gap** in performance in these areas for young Australians in the equity groups, such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Data provided in the Consultation Paper for this current Inquiry highlights that the ACT, like other jurisdictions, experiences significant gaps in achievement in literacy and numeracy between students of different

¹ We partner with 800 low SES schools across Australia to deliver the *Learning for Life* program.

socioeconomic backgrounds. Ensuring these skills remain a priority policy area with associated targets set for them is essential if this long-standing challenge is to be addressed. Such targets should aim to improve achievement for all students, particularly those in the **equity groups**. Public reporting on progress against such targets is essential.

Before turning to some specific initiatives regarding literacy and numeracy, The Smith Family would also note, that **digital skills** have become an **essential pre-requisite** for participation in school education and post-school participation in education, work and Australian society, with access to appropriate digital resources an essential pre-requisite to acquiring such skills.

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

The Smith Family believes enhancing the **digital skills** of Australian students should also be a **priority** for all jurisdictions, as well as the setting of targets to measure progress in this area. The 2023 NAPLAN ICT results show that while ACT students performed above the national average, 30 percent of Year 6 students and 44 percent of Year 10 students did not meet the national proficiency standard. More particularly, national data by SES background highlights that the gaps observed in literacy and numeracy are repeated for digital literacy. Only 40 percent of Year 6 low SES students and 28 percent of Year 10 low SES students achieved the national proficiency standard. This compares to 68 percent and 60 percent respectively for their high SES peers. As well as being problematic in its own right, we note that a lack of digital skills can **compound** gaps in other key skills areas, such as literacy and numeracy.

Supporting improved literacy and numeracy skills

The Smith Family offers a number of programmatic suggestions for supporting improved literacy and numeracy skills in the ACT. These draw on our experience working with students and families experiencing disadvantage over many years and our research and evaluations in this space. These programs **complement** what is happening at school, and take place outside of school hours, including in the home, in community venues and/or on school grounds. Given the significant equity challenge facing the ACT regarding literacy and numeracy outcomes we believe a range of evidence based initiatives are needed to make significant improvements in this key area.

A. Small group tutoring

International evidence shows the potential of **small group tutoring** to improve school students' literacy and numeracy, though there is **less publicly available evidence** to date of the **impact** of significant **Australian policy** efforts in this area.

There is also international and Australian evidence of the value of **highly targeted in-home tutoring** support for students who are struggling with literacy and numeracy. For example, published evaluations of The Smith Family's **Catch-Up Learning** program, which targets *Learning for Life* students in Years 4 to 8 who are struggling in literacy and numeracy, and provides online in-home tutoring twice a week over 20 weeks shows the

impact of such initiatives. The evaluation involving over 400 students from across Australia (see <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/research/catch-up-learning/cul-report-lit-num-final.pdf>) demonstrated:

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

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

B. Student2student

The student2student (s2s) program is a long-standing **evidence-based peer reading intervention**. The program improves the reading ability of participating students in **Years 3 – 8** (aged between 8-14 years) by creating an **out of school reading environment** for engagement between a student 'Reader' and a reading 'Buddy' (who is also a school student).

Research demonstrates the **benefits of cross-age tutoring** in increasing **reading skills**. s2s pairs students in Years 3-4 who are up to **two years behind** in their reading, or up to four years behind for Years 5-8 students, with **trained student buddies** who work with them to improve their reading skills. Buddies are typically two years older than their reader. The pair read together **two to three times a week**, for **20 minutes each session**, over an **18-week period**.

The benefit of frequent reading in a supportive and encouraging environment has consistently demonstrated strong outcomes for participants on the program. Outcomes include:

- 94% of students improved their reading
- 72% of students doubled their reading progress (relates to reading)²
- 74% of student report reading more

² Relates to reading gain rather than flat reading age

- 73% of parents report their child was reading more often
- 84% of students reported feeling better about themselves.

C. Learning Clubs

The Smith Family's Learning Clubs are a safe, supportive **out-of-school-hours learning environment**, where primary or secondary students have opportunity to access **resources** and **participate** in **activities** that **develop** their **academic** and **social skills** through homework, **literacy**, **numeracy**, and **science** support. Students are **supported by trained tutors** who have the skills and knowledge to support Club activities. The Smith Family collaborates with **community partners** to run Learning Clubs in the communities we work in. By extending the time devoted to learning, clubs have the potential to **enhance** students' **learning** skills and **engagement** with education.

Skilled tutors provide **one-on-one to small group support**, with volunteers and partners filling this role. The program is delivered on school grounds or in community centres **at least once a week** over **18 weeks** or more, with sessions running for a **minimum of one hour**, or more depending on what suits the community.

Multi-year analysis of Learning Club outcomes data confirms that Learning Clubs support young people to develop **academic skills**, **improved self-confidence** and **motivation** to **engage** with learning.

Key program outcomes include:

- 75% of students agree going to the club makes them want to go to school
- 74% of students agree the club helped them learn to work with others
- 77% of students agree going to the clubs makes them feel more confident at school
- 76% of students agree it helped them do better in class/school
- 79% of students agree going to the club makes them try harder at school
- 78% of students agree going to the club teaches them to ask for help when needed

D. Let's Count

Children's development of literacy and numeracy skills commences well before they start school. *Let's Count* assists early years professionals to work in partnership with parents and other family members to **promote positive mathematical experiences** for young children that develops their **maths skills and language**. The program emphasises maths in the everyday, and helps children see maths as **relevant, stimulating, and fun**.

Let's Count is an early years program that aims to **significantly improve** the **mathematical capabilities** of **preschool children**. The program recognises that the development of mathematics and numeracy **begins in infancy** and is **strengthened during early childhood through day-to-day-activities**, including **play**. Let's Count provides opportunities for **Early Year Professionals** (both educators and other community professionals who work with families) to **enhance their capacity to promote the messages** and **resources** that parents, and carers can use to support their child's

early numeracy development. In doing so, Let's Count enables parents and carers to support their child's development of early numeracy through **modelling, language and play**. It includes **two, six-hour professional learning sessions** (face-to-face or self-paced online) for early-years professionals to assist them in their **critical role of advising parents and family members** on how to **support the mathematical development of their child**.

Let's Count responds to the more limited confidence to support early numeracy that many parents/carers and early years educators experience. It is designed to lift understanding of basic mathematical concepts in the early years, and thereby provide a foundation for improved numeracy throughout school. The reach of *Let's Count* has been profound with over **154 000** parents, over **293 000** children aged 3-5 and over **10 3000** early years educators and community professionals receiving support through the program from 2011 to 2023.

Longitudinal research with children shows that those who participated in *Let's Count* experienced **strong growth** across a wide range of mathematical areas. This growth was significantly greater than that of similar children who did not participate in the program. *Let's Count* also contributed to children having **positive dispositions** towards maths and increased the knowledge, interest and confidence in maths learning and teaching of educators. The program strengthened the communication between educators and parents/carers around children's mathematical development. The success of this program over many years attests to the value of a targeted approach to learning interventions in the period prior to school, to support children's longer-term numeracy development.

Further information on the *Let's Count* program is available at <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/research/reports/lets-count-research-report.pdf> and <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/research/reports/lets-count-lit-rep-final.pdf>

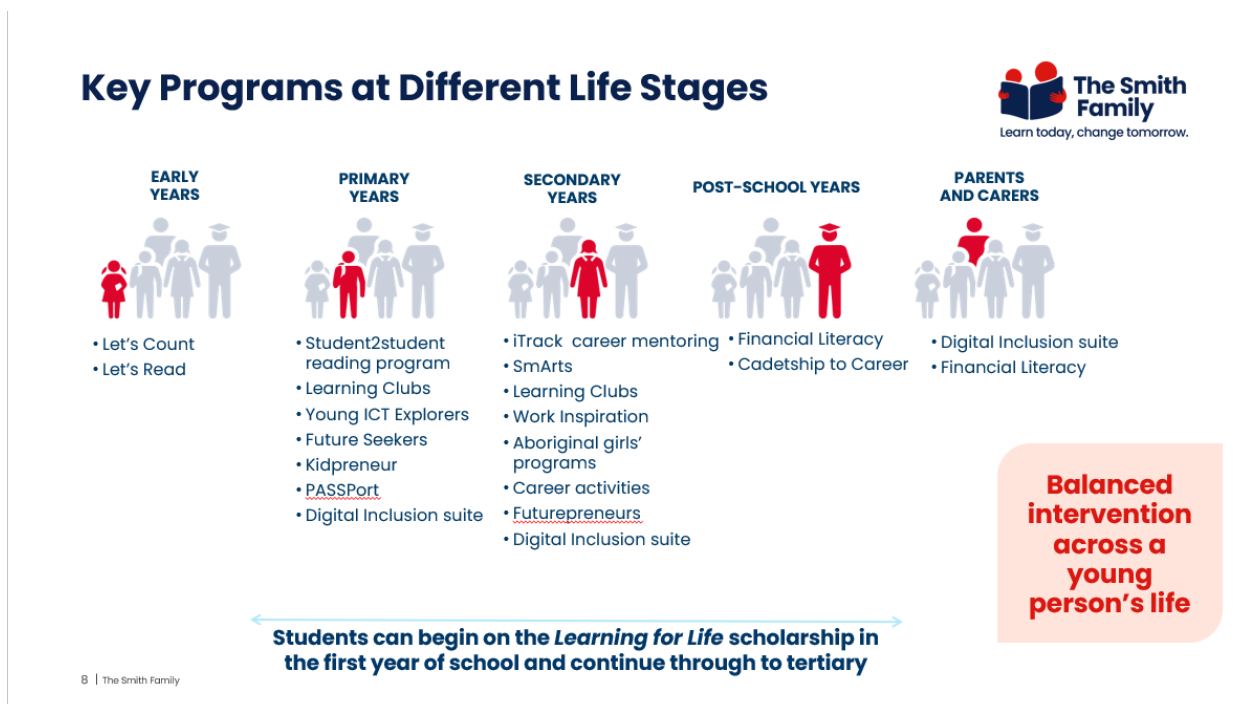
Appendix

The Learning for Life program

The *Learning for Life* program recognises that young people experiencing disadvantage benefit from **extra support to succeed at school**, complete Year 12, and go on to work or further studies. *Learning for Life* provides families and scholarship students with the following support:

- A **modest biannual payment**³ to families to help them cover core education-related expenses such as books, uniforms and excursions.
- Support from a *Learning for Life Family Partnership Coordinator* (a Smith Family team member) who works with the family to support their child's long-term participation in education.
- Access to a range of **programs** to help ensure children's engagement in education. These include **literacy** and **numeracy** programs, learning clubs, mentoring and **career support** programs and **digital** and financial literacy programs (as shown in the diagram below).

The Learning for Life Program Suite



³ The annual *Learning for Life* payment to a family for a school student is \$478 and for a senior secondary school student is \$772.

Learning for Life is highly **targeted**. Students in receipt of the scholarship are likely to struggle to achieve educationally without support, as shown by the profile of students on the program in **ACT**:

- All are **financially disadvantaged**, as evidenced by having a Health Care Card or Pensioner Benefit Card.
- 25 percent are from an **Aboriginal** and/or Torres Strait Islander background.
- **40 percent** of *Learning for Life* students and 37 percent of primary carers have a **health or disability** issue.
- 45 percent of parents/carers have **not completed Year 12** or equivalent.
- The parent/carer of around 76 percent of students are **not in paid employment**.
- 69 percent of students live in a **single parent** family and a further 4 percent live in **grandparent-headed** families or other care relationships.
- 28 percent of students live in a household with **six or more** people.

Learning for Life Program Outcomes

The Smith Family uses **Outcomes Based Accountability** (OBA) to measure the effectiveness of both our shorter programs and the *Learning for Life* scholarship program. OBA asks three central questions:

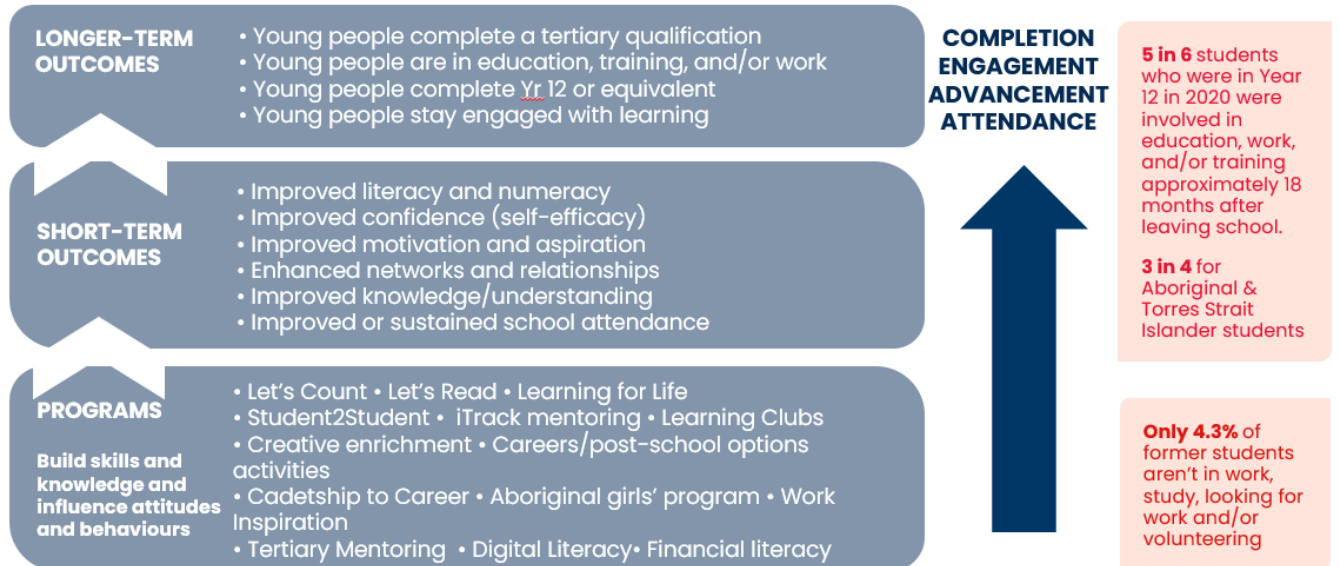
- How much did we do? (outputs)
- How well did we do it? (quality)
- Is anyone better off? (outcomes)

Data is collected for each of the shorter programs to answer each of these questions.

Each *Learning for Life* student has a Unique Student Identifier, enabling us to longitudinally track their school attendance, achievement, school completion and post-school engagement in employment, education and training. By way of example of the impact of our work, 85 percent of the highly disadvantaged young Australians who were on the *Learning for Life* program and in Year 12 in 2020, were in work, study or training, two and a half years after leaving school

We have a unique longitudinal dataset on young people experiencing disadvantage and our analysis of this data is contributing to the Australian educational evidence base (see for example <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/research/reports/attendance-lifts-achievement-2021.pdf>) .

Measures of effectiveness



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