



everyone's family

Northern Territory Government Education Engagement Strategy Submission

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Contact

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1. Overview of The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity founded in 1922 to improve the lives of disadvantaged children in Australia. Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for them by providing long-term support for their participation in education. This mission is founded on the belief that every child deserves a chance to thrive and create a better future for themselves. The Smith Family works with vulnerable children, young people and their families, who experience multiple and compounding challenges in life, with the aim of supporting these young people to achieve educationally.

The Smith Family takes a place-based approach and is currently working in over 90 communities across every state and territory. This includes Darwin, Palmerston and Katherine in the Northern Territory. In FY21, The Smith Family supported more than 210,000 children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals across Australia, including over **170,000 children and young people** through our programs. This includes over 56,000 financially disadvantaged children on our long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life* (LfL).

In FY21, our programs supported in total over **5,700** children, young people, their parents/carers and community professionals who work with them in Northern Territory. This included over 1,000 on *Learning for Life*. Around two in three LfL students in the Northern Territory are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. As part of our work in the NT, we are the Facilitating Partner of the Commonwealth Government's *Communities for Children* (CfC) program in Katherine and over 800 children, young people, parents/carers and community professionals participate annual in programs associated with CfC.

The work of The Smith Family involves deep partnership with families given the clear evidence of the importance of **parental engagement** for children's educational and life outcomes. All families on the *Learning for Life* program for example, enter into a Family Partnership Agreement with The Smith Family which outlines a shared responsibility around supporting their child to stay engaged in education. Our staff form strong trusting and supportive relationships with parents/primary carers, adopting a strengths based approach and these relationships have been critical in enabling significant growth of our programs in the NT.

The Smith Family also works in partnership with range of schools in the NT to deliver programs and a list of these schools is included in the Appendix.

2. *Learning for Life* program

Students can participate on the *Learning for Life* program from the first formal year of school through to the completion of tertiary studies. The program aims to strengthen the educational outcomes of students by providing:

- A modest biannual financial scholarship to assist with the costs of education
- Support from a community-based worker (a Family Partnership Coordinator)
- Access to other educational wrap-around support programs.¹

¹ Further information on *Learning for Life* is available at www.thesmithfamily.com.au

All students on LfL have a Smith Family Unique Student Identifier which enables us to track a range of educational outcomes for each student on the program, including school attendance, achievement, Year 12 completion and post-school engagement in employment, education and training. These outcomes align well with the areas of interest to the Northern Territory Department of Education, as noted in the *Education Engagement Strategy Discussion Paper*.

3. Education Engagement Strategy

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Northern Territory Government's deliberations on how to support more NT students to engage more fully in their education and to achieve the outcomes which will lay the foundations for positive post-school social and economic outcomes.

Our submission focuses on two areas of promising practice which we think have the potential to further contribute to the goal of stronger student engagement. These areas draw on The Smith Family's experience and research, as well as international evidence. They are:

- **Elders in School**
- **Careers support in primary and secondary school**

3.1 Elders in School

There is a range of research which underpins The Smith Family's Elders in School program and our approach to supporting students in the Northern Territory. This research includes:

- Students achieve better learning outcomes in school – that is, they are more engaged, achieve higher academic results and have improved attendance levels – when they are **active learners** in contexts that are **authentic** and related to their **everyday lives** (Ewing, 2014).²
- Maintaining **connections to family, culture and community** is essential for strengthening an Aboriginal child's educational achievements. Education strategies that pay attention to ways of maintaining connections to family, culture and community in remote Aboriginal contexts will ultimately lead to stronger educational, social and cultural outcomes, and subsequently increase the likelihood of aspirations for, and pathways into, higher education.³

The Elders in School program is a strengths based program that uses Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders from the local community to:

- Work with students to share cultural knowledge
- Increase student attendance, engagement, wellbeing and educational outcomes.

The program uses the cultural knowledge and relationships of local Elders to encourage increased attendance, improve student wellbeing, sense of belonging and enhance educational outcomes for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. It reinforces positive relationships between teachers

² Ewing, B.F. (2014). *Rich and purposeful mathematical knowledge of mothers and children in a Torres Strait Islander community*. Queensland University of Technology: Faculty of Education, 3 (42).

³ Smith J A, Bullot M, Kerr V, Yibarbuk D, Ocaj M & Shalley F (2018) *Maintaining connection to family, culture and community: Implications for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pathways into higher education*. Rural Society, 27:2, 108 – 124.

and their students, families and the wider community. It explicitly includes Elders as key stakeholders in efforts focused on improving students' access to support networks. The Elders in School program is run at Palmerston College, with Year 6 students from a feeder primary school, Gray Primary School, also participating in part of the program. The Elders in School program has a range of components including:

- **Mentoring Women's and Men's Business**
 - This runs for a term with 1.5 hour session for six to 10 sessions
 - Focus is on Years 7 to 9
 - It is facilitated by a number of Elders who act as mentors and a teacher
 - There is a range of yarning and cultural learning focused on wellbeing, identity, positive choices and leadership
 - A range of projects are undertaken using for example art, dance, film, message sticks.
 - Around 160 students are involved in the mentoring component each year.
- **Elders in the Classroom**
 - Teachers choose to have Elders as part of their lessons to add value to curriculum content being covered in class, enrich learning space or explain cultural concepts and provide real life stories and experience.
 - Around 200 students a year have an Elder visit their classroom and support curriculum content
- **Special occasions** – cultural events and ceremonies
 - Elders coordinate or are part of important school celebrations such as NAIDOC Week or Sorry Day
 - Students represent their school at important community events.
 - This dimension of the program involves the whole school.

Program outcomes

Student feedback following participation in the Elders in School program indicates students:

- Were more positive to school and more inclined to want to attend school
- Felt happier, more confident and more supported at school
- Were more likely to pursue leadership opportunities
- Learnt more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture
- Gained connections to a mentor/older person who can provide advice and support

School feedback reports improvements in:

- Student engagement at school during and after the program
- Aboriginal students' sense of belonging at school
- Cross cultural understanding
- Learning and understanding of curriculum content
- Family and community engagement with the school.

The Smith Family's experience of the Elders in School program supports the earlier evidence cited regarding the importance of authentic contexts and connections to culture, family and community for young people's educational outcomes. There may be value in expanding this initiative to other schools in the Northern Territory.

3.2 Careers support in primary and secondary school

The Smith Family has significant experience in implementing a range of careers support programs in both primary and secondary schools in communities across Australia. This experience, coupled with international and Australian evidence, shows the pivotal role such support can play in supporting engagement and long term participation in education.

Careers support in primary school

Given the early disengagement from school of some young people in the NT, the research on the role of careers support in primary school is particularly relevant. Research shows the importance of working with children from a young age regarding careers. This is particularly important for children from vulnerable backgrounds, including those from low socioeconomic families and those in communities marked by high unemployment and/or low rates of labour force participation.

Children's perceptions about certain jobs and careers are formed and sometimes cemented at a young age. Children's aspirations are often shaped and restricted by gender stereotyping, socioeconomic background and who they know. These factors go on to influence the academic effort children put into certain lessons, the subjects they choose to study and the jobs they pursue. Aspirations are not only embedded at a young age but are also difficult to shift. For example, students who do not express Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) related aspirations at age 10 are unlikely to develop STEM aspirations by age 14 with longer-term consequences for their pursuit of science subjects and related careers.

Research with Australian children shows that their most popular careers are highly concentrated into a few occupations which reflect a celebrity focus (sportsman/woman), highly visible public service careers (teacher/lecturer, police), health (vet) and modern growth drivers (scientist). There is a major disconnect between the careers that primary-age children are most interested in and those that the economy needs. A similar misalignment is also evident among young people in secondary schooling, highlighting that career aspirations of children are not transient as is sometimes argued.

In light of the international evidence, it has been concluded that: "Early intervention can be a very cost effective targeted way of raising children's aspirations and broadening their horizons. The evidence suggests that giving children the chance to meet volunteers from the world helps them to see the meaning and relevance of the subjects they are studying at school. Embedding experiences of real-world in learning and the school curriculum can lead to increased motivation resulting in increased educational attainment. When they engage with children, volunteers are routinely perceived as speaking from a vantage point of real authority...They can also play a key role in providing children with role models and tackling stereotyping around gender and ethnicity and help ensure that children at a young age don't start ruling out options for themselves. Instead the aim is to show children the vast range of opportunities open to them...If children see the opportunities their learning can give them they are more likely to have higher and broader aspirations...For young people, access to new and useful information about the labour market allows them to draw better links between their current and future imagined lives" (*Drawing the future*, 2018 pp.74-5).

Future Seekers

In light of this evidence, The Smith Family has been delivering the Future Seekers program for a number of years. Future Seekers targets students in Year 5 or can be flexibly delivered for students in Years 4 or 6 if that is a better fit for a particular school. It is run with groups of up to 30 students

and can be delivered with multiple groups in one school, depending on the school's needs. It takes place over 5 to 9 weeks, with a 90 minute session per week. There are five core sessions with an additional four sessions that the school can also opt into. The program is delivered by a trained facilitator and a classroom teacher. Future Seekers aims to increase students' knowledge of the world of work and how that relates to their own strengths and interests. This contributes to increasing students' belief that they can achieve a career related aspiration and this supports their engagement in education. It is an important early intervention component of a planned program of learning, to prepare students for life beyond school. Key to the program is supporting students in the primary years to come into contact with a diversity of people who are in a range of jobs and have had an assortment of career paths. There may be value in considering further expansion of the Future Seekers program in the Northern Territory given its capacity to help students link school to the world of work post-school, drawing on their own interests and capabilities.

Careers support in high school

Research with older young people shows that despite the proliferation of new careers and growing industries, many continue to aspire to jobs that may no longer be relevant or available and their understanding varies greatly on what various jobs entail or the pathways to get them there. This is despite the huge increase in the availability of information about careers or career options, including online.⁴

International evidence shows the importance of exposing young people to the world of work while they are at school. Young people who participate in four or more encounters with the world of work while in school are more likely to be in employment, education or training during their 20s. These encounters include a range of activities such as: career insight talks; workplace, VET and university visits; mentoring; and employability skills workshops.

Effective careers support in high schools:

- Enhances young people's knowledge, skills and confidence regarding jobs, careers, what employers require and post-school planning
- Support young people to develop ambitious and realistic career aspirations
- Encourages them to complete Year 12 or equivalent by linking school to the world of work post-school. This is critical for young people's engagement.
- Exposes them to the contemporary world of work and builds their networks with employers and employees.
- Engages them with diverse post-school training and education offerings, including Vocational Education and Training.
- Empowers their parents/carers to be engaged in their education, career planning and post-school choices.

The Smith Family has a range of integrated careers support programs which it provides to young people as they move through high school. We would be happy to provide further detail on these programs.

⁴ *Moments of Choice* Final Report: Behavioural Insights Team, August 2016.

APPENDIX

Northern Territory Partner Schools

Darwin – Primary

Karama

Malak

Manunda Terrace

Millner

Wulagi

Darwin - Secondary

Sanderson Middle

Casuarina Senior College

Palmerston and surrounds – Primary

Gray

Driver

Woodroffe

Humpty Doo

Palmerston and surrounds – Secondary

Palmerston College – 2 campuses (Yrs 7-9 and 10-12)

Taminmin College