



Submission to the South Australian Department for Education

The purpose of public education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the important question of ‘the purpose of public education in South Australia’ and **congratulates** the Chief Executive of the SA Department for Education for initiating this conversation. Education is one of the world’s most **powerful change agents** and in line with The Smith Family’s purpose our focus in this submission is on how public education can **overcome inequality caused by poverty**.

We recommend **three complementary** sources inform the purpose of public education in SA:

1. The South Australian Government’s commitments to ensuring **every young person can fulfil their potential** and achieving an **egalitarian society**.
2. The two goals of the **Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration**
 - The student focussed goal of all young Australians being confident and creative, successful life-long learners and active and informed members of the community is highly relevant given it is **inclusive** of all students, has a **longer-term** focus and acknowledges a **societal** role for education.
 - The system focussed goal is highly relevant given its complementary focus on **equity** and **excellence**. Australia’s educational system cannot be excellent if it is not equitable.
3. **ARACY’s Wellbeing Framework** (the Nest) which considers the **whole child** through its six **interconnected** domains and was developed from what children and young people said they needed to have a ‘good life’.
 - While public education has a particular role to play in the **learning domain**, there is considerable value in seeing the broader role it can and should play in contributing to all six dimensions of the Framework. Public education has a key role for example in supporting children and young people to have a positive sense of **identity** and **culture**. Put simply, the purpose of public education is **so much more than learning**, essential though that role is.

Public education therefore has a particularly crucial role to play in supporting more **equitable educational** and life outcomes for all children.

We recommend the **OECD’s 2023 Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People**, inform the skills, capabilities and mindsets young people need in the 21st century. It gives particular attention to:

- Literacy, numeracy and problem-solving **skills**, social, civic, emotional, entrepreneurial, financial, communication, creativity and language skills.
- Promoting **wellbeing** including equipping young people with socioemotional skills and coping strategies to protect against stress and the impacts of adversity on wellbeing.
- Enabling young people to participate in an increasingly **digitalised world**.

An **ecological framework** of young people’s development demands an approach of **shared responsibility** across individuals, organisations and sectors if children are to achieve their **full potential**. This is particularly important for children and young people **experiencing disadvantage**. The Smith Family looks forward to continuing to work with young people, families, educational institutions, Government, community organisations, business, philanthropy and the wider community, to support young people experiencing disadvantage to achieve their potential.

THE SMITH FAMILY

The Smith Family is a national charity which has been supporting children and families experiencing disadvantage for 100 years. 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 take a **place-based approach** and are working in over **90** low SES communities across every state and territory. This includes in **10** communities in South Australia (Christie Downs, Elizabeth Downs, Elizabeth Vale, Hackham, Morphett Vale, Port Adelaide-Enfield, Port Augusta, Salisbury North, Smithfield Plains and Whyalla).

Our programs are:

- **Evidence-based** and highly **targeted**, supporting children and young people at significant **risk** of poor educational outcomes.
- Based on the principles of **reciprocity, accountability** and **parental engagement**.
- Demonstrably **effective** at improving educational and employment outcomes for highly disadvantaged young people.
- **Cost-effective**, through leveraging multiple **partnerships** with families, schools and other educational institutions, governments, business, philanthropy and the broader community.

The children and young people we support

In FY22, The Smith Family supported more than **190,000** children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals nationally through our education-focused programs. This number includes around 160,000 children and young people, of whom around **60,000** participated on our largest program, the long-term educational scholarship, **Learning for Life**. Currently around **6,800** children and young people in **South Australia** are supported on *Learning for Life*.

Learning for Life is highly **targeted**. Students in receipt of the scholarship, are likely to struggle to achieve educationally without support, given the multiple challenges they face, as shown by the profile of the students on the program in South Australia:

- All are **financially disadvantaged**, as evidenced by having a Health Care Card or Pensioner Benefit Card.
- One in five are from an **Aboriginal** and/or Torres Strait Islander background.
- 41 percent of students and 39 percent of their primary carers have a **health** or **disability** issue.
- 55 percent of parents/carers have **not completed Year 12** or equivalent.
- The parent/carer of around 75 percent of students are **not in** paid **employment**.
- 55 percent of students live in a **single parent** family and a further seven percent live in **grandparent**-headed families or other care relationships.
- 31 percent of students live in a household with **six or more** people.
- 18 percent of students are from **non-English speaking backgrounds**.

Partnering with the SA Department for Education on data exchange

The Smith Family is very pleased to be partnering with the South Australian Department for Education on a **data exchange** initiative which we believe is **nation-leading**. Built on a **shared agenda** that seeks to **improve** the educational outcomes of students experiencing disadvantage, this initiative sees our front-line South Australian staff getting access in **real-time** to educational data (such as school attendance and achievement) held by the Department on *Learning for Life* students. This is enabling our staff to provide more **timely** and **targeted support** when students are struggling or to reinforce when good progress is being made. Eighteen months into the initiative, staff rate this initiative highly as it is making a significant contribution to the quality of support they are able to offer students and families.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

There is a range of South Australian data that is important context for consideration of the role of public education, particularly in regard to equity:

- Around one in four children (23.8 percent) start school **developmentally vulnerable** in one or more key areas and only just over half (53.7 percent) are on track in the five key areas of the Australian Early Development Census (Commonwealth of Australia 2022).
- **NAPLAN** results in **reading** for 2022 show that **81.5 percent** students in Year 5 whose parents had not completed Year 12 or equivalent, met or exceeded the National Minimum Standard. This figure declined to just **two in three** students (67.3 percent) by Year 9. This compares to 98.1 percent and 95.7 percent of students in Years 5 and 9 respectively, who have a parent who has completed a Bachelor degree.
- In 2022, the **average school attendance rate** for students in government schools in Years 1 to 10 was 84.8 percent. This means on average students missed over six weeks of school across the year. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Years 1 to 10 in government schools on average missed more than 11 weeks of school in 2022.
- The **Year 10 to Year 12 retention rate** in Government schools declined from 85.1 percent in 2020 to 82.6 percent in 2021. The Year 12 attainment rate in 2021 for low socioeconomic schools was 70.8 percent and 85.7 percent for high socioeconomic schools.

The South Australia Department of Education has been measuring four key dimensions of students' **wellbeing** and **engagement** for a number of years and this data is also important context for consideration of the purpose of public education. Data for 2022 includes:

- **Emotional wellbeing** – the vast majority of students are *generally happy* (85 percent), with 18 percent *feeling frequently sad*. Around three quarters of students (77 percent) are *satisfied with their life*.
- **Engagement with school** – almost all students (97 percent) *feel supported by their teachers*.
- **Learning readiness** – 59 percent *feel confident about their academic abilities* and 40 percent *feel that they always persevere with tasks despite facing challenges*. Both of these dimensions decline as students move through school.
- **Health and well being outside of school** – Just over half (53 percent) of students *get a good night sleep at least five nights a week* and around two in three (63 percent) *eat breakfast at least five times a week*.

While the above data is not broken down by **socioeconomic background** other research suggests that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds feel **less confident** about their academic abilities and are **less likely to persevere** with challenging tasks than their more affluent peers. For example, in the 2018 Programme of International Assessment (PISA), the least disadvantaged students reported higher self-efficacy than the most disadvantaged students. Similarly, the least disadvantaged students believed in a growth mindset to a greater extent than the most disadvantaged students (19 percentage point difference). Given this data, it is very likely that the proportion of low SES students in SA who are doing well in the learning readiness domain is **quite low**.

The longer-term **impact of COVID-19** on students, particularly those experiencing disadvantage is still being played out. Despite the best efforts of students, families and schools, COVID has **exacerbated pre-existing gaps** in learning between young people experiencing disadvantage and their more advantaged peers and this is likely to be evidenced in key educational outcomes data for a number of years if there are not more significant efforts to support children experiencing disadvantage.

Further important context for considering the public purpose of education in SA is the **higher proportion of children** in South Australia who are experiencing **socioeconomic disadvantage** compared to Australia as a whole. Fifty six percent of children under 5 years of age in SA are living in disadvantaged circumstances, compared to 40 percent of children nationally.¹

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE PURPOSE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

The South Australian Government has a strong commitment to investing in **education** as a key pillar to ensuring **every young person can fulfil their potential** and to achieving an **egalitarian society**.² This provides a useful frame – both at the individual student level and at the societal level – for considering the purpose of public education.

In addition, The Smith Family believes the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People’s Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People (the Nest), are valuable inputs for considering the purpose of public education in South Australia.

A. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

The Mparntwe Declaration’s goal for children and young people (Goal 2) is that all young Australians become:

- **Confident** and **creative** individuals
- Successful **lifelong learners**
- **Active** and **informed** members of the **community**.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics June 2021 *Regional population by age and sex*

² Premier Malinauskas, 2022

The features of this goal which The Smith Family notes as being highly relevant are its:

- **Inclusivity** – this is a goal for all young people
- **Longer-term focus** - education is seen as supporting the acquisition of the skills, dispositions and mindsets needed for **lifelong learning** and
- Emphasis on the **societal** role of education, in addition to its role for individuals.

The other goal of the Mparntwe Education Declaration is also relevant and is a **systemic** one, namely that the ‘education system promotes **excellence and equity**’.

In South Australia, Government schools have a much higher proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds than non-government schools. Public education therefore has a particularly crucial role to play in supporting more **equitable educational** and life outcomes for all children. The data cited earlier showing the significant differences in educational outcomes being achieved by different groups of children and young people in SA highlights the need for a stronger focus on equity.

The Smith Family would also argue that as per the Mparntwe Declaration, the pursuit of equity should complement a focus on **excellence**. We support the conclusions of the 2011 *Review of Funding for Schooling* (the Gonski Review) namely: “Every child should have access to the **best possible education, regardless** of where they live, the income of their family or the school they attend” (p xiv) and “ensuring that all Australian children have access to the best possible education could be considered ‘the **moral imperative** of schooling’” (p. 105).

Analysis of national NAPLAN data by the Grattan Institute (2016) highlights a particularly disturbing reality in Australian schools regarding equity and excellence: “For students with the same level of initial achievement in Year 3 (a proxy for similar capability), less progress is made by disadvantaged students, at disadvantaged schools, and in disadvantaged areas. This strongly suggests that **equally capable students are failing to reach their potential**. This holds for disadvantaged students at all ability levels in Year 3, especially bright students from poor backgrounds in disadvantaged schools” (p 25). While the data is not broken down by jurisdiction it is likely that South Australia is not exempt from this reality, heightening the need for public education to increase its equity focus.

B. ARACY’s Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People (the Nest)

ARACY’s Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People, the Nest, also provides useful input for considering of the public purpose of education. Importantly, the Framework:

- Provides a way of thinking about the **whole child** in the context of their daily lives.
- Was developed from **what children and young people said** they needed to have a ‘good life’.
- Has six **interconnected** domains, with all six seen as important for children and young people’s wellbeing:
 - Valued, loved and safe
 - Material basics
 - Healthy
 - Learning
 - Participating
 - Positive sense of identity and culture (Goodhue et al 2021).

While public education has a particular role to play in the **learning domain**, The Smith Family would argue that there is considerable value in seeing a broader role that it can and should play in contributing to all dimensions of the Framework. For example, public education has a key role to play in supporting children and young people to have a positive sense of **identity** and **culture**. Put simply, the purpose of public education is **so much more than learning**, essential though that role is.

SKILLS, CAPABILITIES AND MINDSETS YOUNG PEOPLE NEED

There has been a great deal written in Australia and internationally about the dynamic economic, social, cultural, environmental and technological changes that are occurring and will continue to occur across the 21st century, and the implications this has for young people who are currently being educated.

The OECD's 2023 *Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People* reflects a contemporary and useful synthesis which The Smith Family recommends inform South Australia's thinking on the skills and capabilities young people need to develop and the role public education has in this. The document defines 'young people' as those aged 15 to 29, but we would argue its applicability is to a broader range of young people.

Of particular relevance to this submission are the following sections from the *Recommendation*:

- Ensure all young people of all backgrounds and in all circumstances acquire relevant **knowledge** and develop appropriate **skills** and **competencies**.
 - This includes basic skills (literacy, numeracy and problem-solving), and social, civic, emotional, entrepreneurial, financial, communication, creativity and language skills.
- Promote **wellbeing** in education and training institutions, including by equipping young people with socioemotional skills and coping strategies to protect against stress and the impacts of adversity on wellbeing.
- Enable all young people to participate in an increasingly **digitalised world**.
 - Equip young people with digital skills and problem-solving skills for the digital environment.
 - Empower young people to engage safely, healthily and responsibly in the digital environment (OECD, 2023).

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The Smith Family works within an **ecological framework** which acknowledges there are **multiple influences** on the development of children and young people, including family, peers, educational institutions, where a young person lives and systems, policies, programs and societal norms. We also strongly believe that supporting children and young people to achieve their full potential is a **shared responsibility** across sectors and the various key actors in a young person's life.

That shared responsibility is particularly important for young people experiencing disadvantage. Schools play a key role, but this must be complemented by partnerships across government, for example with health and community services, and with non-government organisations and particularly in the area of careers support and post-school pathways, with business and industry. In the careers support space, trilateral partnerships, involving schools, non-government organisations and businesses, focussed on providing high quality exposure to the world of work, is particularly important for young people experiencing disadvantage.

Recent research by The Smith Family (2022) with over 4,500 young people supported on our *Learning for Life* program highlights what they see would strengthen the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage:

- More access to **comprehensive careers advice at school**, including in the middle years of school and outside of critical periods (for example subject selection, applying for post-school study), and transition support in the period after leaving school.
- More **personalised, one-to-one advice** from careers staff, with a focus on exploring what a young person wants to do in life and options to achieve their goals, including more frequent support for those who do not have specific goals.
- A **broader approach to careers advice**, including information about labour markets, employment pathways, skills that will be in demand in the future, alternative pathways and support to develop a range of options in case they face difficulties getting into their first choice
- Increased opportunities to **study VET subjects at school and post-school**, engage in **work experience placements** and be exposed to the **world of work**, while at school.
- Greater exposure to **apprenticeships and traineeships** and what to expect when a young person is the first in their family to participate in post-school study.
- Connections to **mentors, internships** and older students to help inform career planning.
- Greater **individualised support**, including early intervention, for students struggling with academic and/or personal issues.
- Support to develop **self-confidence** and other **life skills**, including how to seek help.
- Strategies that support **family members'** access to up-to-date labour market, education and training information, and how they can support young people to develop their goals and plans to achieve them.

Implementing many of the above recommendations will require cross-sectoral partnerships.

Complexity of the service systems especially for young people most in need

The Smith Family's experience is that student and family needs are becoming **increasingly complex**, and this complexity **impacts students' educational** outcomes. There are a significant number of students and families whose experience of disadvantage is **multilayered** and **prolonged**, including intergenerational. Many face health and disability challenges, including mental health, alongside of poverty and other issues. As a consequence, in addition to engaging with the education system, they are also likely to engage with many Government and non-government agencies, often simultaneously in an effort to access health and disability support, income support, housing support, family violence services and employment services.

Despite the good intentions of those who work in them, and very significant Government and community investment, the **systems set up to 'serve'** these young people and their families tend to be **complex** for them to access. The Smith Family contends that while aspects of the human services system work well, the system needs to be **redesigned**, so it is better able to address the needs of those young people experiencing complex and sustained disadvantage.

Schools are an integral part of the human services system, with barriers to access of these critical services sitting outside the education system itself. These barriers however, directly impact students and in turn schools' ability to support students to achieve educationally. If South Australia is to address inequities in educational achievement, we believe attention needs to be paid to **how the current service system can better support young people** to realise their potential.

Conclusion

The Smith Family welcomes the current process which is exploring what is the purpose of public education in South Australia. We welcome the opportunity to make this submission and to be involved in the ongoing discussions regarding this key question. Education is one of the world's most powerful change agents and we believe that its power can be further harnessed in South Australia, both to the benefit of individuals and the whole community. We look forward to continuing to work in partnership with the Department to achieve this.

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