

Queensland Government

Putting Queensland Kids First Consultation

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Introduction: The Smith Family

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Queensland Government's "Putting Queensland Kids First" consultation. 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 take a **place-based** approach and are currently working in over 90 low SES communities across every state and territory. This includes 16 communities in Queensland including many **regional** communities.

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, schools, 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 at <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/programs/learning-for-life>

We support around **34,000** children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals in Queensland through our programs each year. This includes **11,500** students on the **Learning for Life** scholarship program. We also support early numeracy and early literacy development through our **Let's Count** and **Let's Read** programs and children and family outcomes through being the Facilitating Partner for the Commonwealth Government funded **Communities for Children** program in both Townsville West and Capricorn (Rockhampton).

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 for example, enter into a Family Partnership Agreement with The Smith Family around our shared commitment to supporting their child to achieve educationally.

The Smith Family's work **complements** and is **well integrated** into the schools and communities in which we work. The Smith Family has formal partnerships with **over 150 low ICSEA** schools in Queensland, around a shared goal of supporting students experiencing disadvantage to achieve educationally.

Partnering on data exchange to improve student outcomes

The Smith Family is pleased to be working in partnership with the Queensland Department for Education on a data exchange arrangement. Built on a **shared agenda** that seeks to **improve** the educational outcomes of students experiencing disadvantage, this initiative will see our front-line Queensland 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 will enable our staff to provide more **timely** and **targeted support** when students are struggling or to reinforce when good progress is being made. Our experience of similar arrangements in South Australia is that they can make a significant contribution to the support The Smith Family staff are able to offer students and families.

Putting Queensland Kids First

While much of our commentary below pertains directly to the **educational** challenges faced by families living with disadvantage, many of the research and practice insights we cite are applicable to **child and family policy** more broadly, in part because of the interconnections between opportunities and challenges in one area and another.

Core principles to inform support for children, young people and families

We welcome the principles informed approach taken by the Consultation draft. We recommend that **explicit** (rather than a potentially implicit) reference be made to the **social ecological model** as the underpinning framework for policy and practice seeking to 'put kids first'.

The Smith Family's work – and that of many organisations working with children and families – is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological systems model, as it seeks to holistically capture the range of **structural factors** and family dynamics that can impact the development and life course of a child. We see this understanding as vital to the development of well-informed policy because the impacts of **macro systems** (political factors, socio-cultural milieu, social norms and law), **exosystems** (media, geo-social factors and local government), and **micro factors** (local school, peers, neighbourhood and family) all interact uniquely to shape the life of an individual child (Bronfenbrenner 1977). To focus on only some of these factors or systems will significantly limit the outcomes children are able to achieve.

Taking an ecological perspective is particularly important for children and young people **experiencing disadvantage** given:

- They are likely to face challenges **across a range of key areas** such as safety, health, housing and education
- There are **cumulative impacts** to disadvantage which may begin in childhood but continue to shape the long term trajectory that unfolds across the lifecourse
- How **systems** are **designed** and **delivered** either supports children and young people to realise their potential or holds them where they are.

As shown through the data presented below on *Learning for Life* students and families in Queensland, many face health and disability challenges, including mental health, alongside poverty and a range of other issues. As a consequence, they are likely to engage with many Government (both state and Commonwealth) and non-government agencies, often simultaneously.

Despite the good intentions of those who work in them, and very significant Government and community investment, the systems set up to 'serve' these Australians, including children and young people and their parent/carers, tend to be complex for them to access. They are often ineffective in supporting positive change and inadvertently rob people of a sense of **agency** and **empowerment**.

The Smith Family contends that while aspects of Australia's human services system work well, the system needs to be **redesigned**, so it is better able to address the needs of those children and young people living in families experiencing complex and sustained disadvantage. In improving the system for these children and young people, there is likely to be added benefits for all who use the system, in terms of quality, efficiency and effectiveness.

Central to a successful system are relationships of **respect, dignity** and **empowerment** and a **long-term focus**, given that sustained change takes time. Underpinning the system, as identified in the consultation paper, should be an understanding of the **strengths** and **aspirations** of service users, rather than a deficit approach that focuses on what individuals 'can't do' or 'don't have'. The Smith Family's experience working with highly vulnerable families is of their enormous strength

and resilience in the most challenging of circumstances. **Outcomes-based contracting of services**, rather than a focus on outputs, is also a key component of a successful system.

The Smith Family appreciates the challenge of changing the human services system, particularly given the different responsibilities of State, Commonwealth and non-government organisations, but we believe there is some **appetite for change** across organisations, sectors and jurisdictions. There is also enough evidence and insights from around the world and Australia to inform efforts in this space. We would encourage such thinking to underpin efforts aimed at 'putting Queensland kids first'.

The Smith Family also believes that ARACY's **Child and Youth Wellbeing Outcomes Framework** (the Nest), which conceptualises wellbeing as **six inter-connected domains** for young people aged zero to 24 years, offers a more comprehensive approach to considering children's development and would strengthen what is proposed in the consultation paper.

We note too with regards to the principles underpinning the approach (p 11), that given the clear evidence of inequitable outcomes being generally achieved by children and young people from **low socioeconomic backgrounds**, that this group should also be included as a key equity group for whom outcomes are specifically **tracked and reported on publicly**. We also note under the 'child and young person centric' principle the importance of ensuring a **diversity of voices** inform policy and program development, including from children and young people experiencing disadvantage.

Protective and risk factors influencing children's trajectories

The Smith Family's work is informed by an understanding of the **protective** and **risk factors** that can help promote or limit children's development. This approach is identified in the consultation paper with a range of risk and protective factors identified. While **poverty** is deeply related to some of the risk factors mentioned in the consultation paper, we would argue that given its **pervasive impact** in the lives of children and young people it needs to be explicitly acknowledged as a barrier to equitable outcomes and a significant impediment to the development of positive trajectories.

Poverty is central to discussions of economic and social disadvantage and must be factored into policy and program design focussed on promoting children's wellbeing across all dimensions. It manifests itself in many dimensions of children's development from pre-birth across infancy, childhood, adolescence and into young adulthood. Recent research by Curtin University shows the rate of individual poverty is high in Queensland at 13.5 per cent and more particularly, **poverty amongst children**, at **17.3 per cent**, the second highest state/territory behind the Northern Territory (Duncan 2022: 22).

The profile of the Queensland students and families who are on *Learning for Life* highlight the interconnections between a range of challenges that children living in poverty can experience:

Young people on the program in **Queensland** have the following characteristics:

- All are **financially disadvantaged**, as evidenced by having a Health Care Card or Pensioner Benefit Card.
- 28 percent are **Aboriginal** and/or Torres Strait Islander
- 14 percent of students have a parent/carer from a **non-English speaking background**
- **One third** of *Learning for Life* students and a similar proportion of primary carers have a **health or disability** issue.
- Around half of parents/carers have **not completed Year 12** or equivalent.
- The parent/carer of around three quarters of students are **not in paid employment**.

- 58 percent of students live in a **single parent** family and a further six percent live in **grandparent**-headed families or other care relationships.
- 38 percent of students live in a household with **six or more** people.

The Smith Family would note that the lens taken with respect to protective and risk factors by the discussion paper is very much an **individual** or **family** one, rather than acknowledging that there are **systemic factors** in line with the ecological model which also need to be incorporated into an understanding of risk and protective factors. These include but are not limited to the extent of economic, social and environmental resources, including the social capital available where a family lives, institutional support for equality or conversely, institutional racism.

Investment priorities

In addition to the investment priorities identified in the consultation paper The Smith Family makes the following recommendations.

- There is a clear need for policies and programs targeting children, young people and families experiencing low levels of **digital inclusion**

While literacy and numeracy remain important priorities for education support programs targeting children and families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, **digital literacy** has become an essential skill for participation in school, including primary school, and for social and economic participation post-school.

The OECD 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 latest **Australian Digital Inclusion Index** identifies that key groups of children, young people and families remain significantly disadvantaged when it comes to accessing digital technology including high speed affordable internet, mobile phones and a laptop or processing device. Nearly one in four Australians are identified to be highly excluded from the digital world with key groups at greatest risk of exclusion being: **Aboriginal** and Torres Strait Islander peoples; families living in **public housing**; and families on **low incomes** (Thomas et al 2023).

2022 NAPLAN ICT data shows the extent to which young people from **low SES** are being left behind in the area of digital skills. Only 40 percent of Year 6 low SES students and 28 percent of Year 10 low SES students met the national proficiency standard for their Year level.

Recent research on advancing digital inclusion for low-income families has been led by researchers from QUT, with a number of families supported by The Smith Family participating. Insights from this research and a range of recommendations on how to strengthen these families' digital inclusion is articulated at <https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/projects/advancing-digital-inclusion-in-low-income-australian-families-2/> and could inform the 'putting Queensland kids first' initiative.

- Stronger **monitoring, evaluation** and use of **data** is vital, and requires significant investment.

The Smith Family strongly supports the commitment to evidence-informed practice, which is emphasised throughout the consultation draft. Further to this, we would argue the need for **longitudinal evaluation** which better tracks outcomes across population (participant) (sub)cohorts (eg children and young people from low SES backgrounds).

Such evaluations should be built into the **front end of service delivery** and allow **learnings** throughout the whole implementation cycle. Timeframes for implementation and evaluation need to be properly planned and communicated and require adequate resourcing and appropriately skilled staff to manage them. Incorporating the **voices** of children, young people and families in the evaluation process is also essential in the form of participant feedback and co-design models. Cultivating and rewarding organisations that bring a **learning mindset** to program implementation should be built into the system, so that there is both a building up of the evidence base that supports better children's outcomes and a sharing of that knowledge. A key component of ensuring improved children's outcomes is making more data and evaluations **publicly available**.

- Vulnerability can be **persistent** and **pervasive**, and families may need **sustained support** not just at key transition points

The consultation paper notes the importance of encouraging positive transitions to learning and education in order for children to achieve academic success (p.14 and 18). While cognisant of the importance of transition points as both 'opportunities' and potential 'risk' points for children and families, our practice and research experience also highlights that vulnerabilities can also emerge outside of these key periods. The service system/s therefore need to be **flexible** and agile enough to respond to families as needs arise and change, and before challenges compound and become much more difficult to address.

- **Better integration** of services for children and families across the board

Our practice experience highlights that place-based initiatives may be able to offer a unique solution to the challenges faced by vulnerable families, because place such as schools may be able to provide a physical site (hub) through which multiple supports can be mobilised and networks of collaborators can coordinate their efforts. Place-based practice is innovative practice, however requires a significant investment of time and resources (Strengthening Communities Alliance 2023). In our experience effective place-based collaborations are conditional on:

- A significant investment of resources, potentially spanning years.
- The employment of an appropriately skilled workforce capable of positive relationship building at the local level.
- A commitment to meaningful engagement which includes multiple voices and agencies.
- Genuine understanding and knowledge of the local setting and local needs;
- Thorough exploration of innovative forms of practice and a willingness to embrace new protocols (eg new governance models, shared accountabilities, pooled funding).
- Capability assessments, succession planning and the introduction of good governance protocols are also essential for long term sustainability.

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