



# The Smith Family

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## The Smith Family

### Review of Northern Territory Secondary Education

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## INTRODUCTION

The Smith Family is a national charity working in over 90 low SES communities across every state and territory. We have been supporting children and families experiencing disadvantage for over 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 most powerful change agents and our **purpose** is to overcome **educational inequality caused by poverty**.

In FY22, over 190,000 children and young people, their parents/carers and educators participated in our programs. This includes around 60,000 children and young people who are on our long-term educational scholarship program, **Learning for Life**. This is an **early intervention** program, with most young people recruited to it in primary school, and their participation continues through high school and potentially tertiary education.

*Learning for Life* involves deep and long-term partnerships with families, given the clear evidence of the importance of **parental engagement** for children's educational and life outcomes. All families on the program 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 are critical in supporting young people's long-term engagement in education.

In the **Northern Territory**, The Smith Family supports around **2,500** children, young people and their parents/carers on our programs each year. This includes almost 1,100 children and young people on the *Learning for Life* program. Other programs which we run in Northern Territory include: *Let's Count* and *Let's Read* (early years numeracy and literacy programs) *Learning Clubs*, *Student2Student* (a peer-to-peer reading program), *Passport to Success* (a transition to high-school program), *Future Seekers*, *Work Inspirations*, *SmArts* (which are all careers-related programs), and *Keep the Change* and *Money Talks* (which are financial literacy programs). Of particular importance in the Northern Territory are our *Elders in Schools* and *Parent Engagement* programs.

We have partnerships with a number of Government primary and secondary schools across Darwin and Palmerston, through which we recruit students and families to the *Learning for Life* program and deliver the programs identified above. We also have partnerships with a diverse range of philanthropic, corporate, tertiary education and training organisations to support the delivery of our programs.

This submission draws both on our experience working with young people and their families over many years and our long-term research. The latter includes tracking the school and post-school outcomes of all young people on the *Learning for Life* program (including school attendance, achievement, Year 12 completion and post-school engagement in work and/or study) and our ongoing research with young people.

## LEARNING FOR LIFE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

The profile of the students and families on *Learning for Life* in the Northern Territory is important context for our work in the Territory and this submission. A profile of these students and families is below:

- All are low-income families
- 62% of students are from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds
- 38% of students have a health or disability issue
- 56% of parents/carers of *Learning for Life* students have not completed Year 12 or equivalent

- 60% of parents/carers of *Learning for Life* students are not in the labour force
- 36% of students live in a household with six or more people in it
- 50% of students are in secondary school and 62 percent of *Learning for Life* students in secondary school or tertiary studies have been on the program for four or more years. This includes 29 percent of this group who have been on the program for six or more years.

As the data above indicates, these students and families experience a range of challenges, a number of which can impact on educational engagement and student outcomes. However, the long-term participation in the *Learning for Life* program is testament to their valuing of education.

## DRIVERS OF STUDENT OUTCOMES

Research by Professor John Hattie (2003) identifies a range of in-school factors which impact young people's educational outcomes, in particular the **quality of teaching** that students experience. School culture and environment are also important, particularly the **expectations** held for all students and providing a **safe environment** for learning.

Professor Hattie's research and that of others also identify there are a significant number of '**out-of-school**' factors which influence student outcomes. Research commissioned by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and undertaken by Lamb et al, (2020), while examining the potential impact of COVID on Australian students, has broader applicability. This research identified the following challenges for some students and efforts focused on improving educational outcomes in the Northern Territory need to be cognisant of these challenges and work to address them.

- **Gaps in basic resources needed to support learning**  
One in six Australian children and young people live in low-income households, where life's basics are harder to come by, including food, secure accommodation and transport. These homes also have fewer books and learning materials in the home, including a desk and quiet place to study, and more limited access to support and resources that help form a foundation for learning.
- **Gaps in technology and ICT resources**  
Access to technology and ICT resources are now an essential tool for students' learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While levels of access to ICT and the internet are generally high there is significant variability in the distribution and effective use of technology, based on a range of socioeconomic and demographic factors. This is borne out by data from PISA and The Smith Family's data. A significant proportion of students The Smith Family supports on the *Learning for Life* program do not have an internet connected to a laptop or tablet at home. For those students who do have an internet connected to a device, many are sharing one device with many family members.
- **Some students are not developing some of the qualities that are key to being a successful learner**  
A range of skills, attitudes and behaviours influence learning outcomes. They include students' belief about their academic abilities, their levels of motivation, ability to set goals and persevere despite challenges, their willingness to seek help when required and ability to be self-directed. These skills, mindsets and behaviours can be taught and developed, however research suggests disadvantaged students generally display lower levels of resilience or perseverance with learning, and may be less likely to ask for help.
- **Not all parents feel able to support or be engaged in their child's learning**  
Despite wanting to be actively engaged in their child's learning, many parents from disadvantaged backgrounds: lack confidence or are uncertain about how to support their child's learning; have a poor educational history or experience with schools; come from a country

where the educational system does not encourage parental engagement; or have limited English language skills. Poverty can erode parents' confidence to support their child's education; it limits their networks and access to support and the need to focus on the family 'surviving', absorbs much cognitive energy and time.

### SKILLS, CAPABILITIES AND MINDSETS YOUNG PEOPLE NEED

There has been a great deal written about the dynamic economic, social, cultural, environmental and technological changes that are occurring and will continue to occur across the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 thinking in the Northern Territory on the skills and capabilities young people need to develop, and the role secondary 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 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 YOUNG PEOPLE

The Smith Family works within an **ecological framework** which acknowledges there are **multiple influences** on the development of 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 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 and particularly important in the Northern Territory. 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.

## PATHWAYS, ENGAGEMENT AND TRANSITIONS (PET) RESEARCH

Of particular relevance to the Review of Secondary Education in the Northern Territory is The Smith Family's Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) research project. This three-year (2021- 2023) longitudinal research project is focusing on young people who were in Year 10 or Year 12 in 2020 and on the *Learning for Life* program. The project is trying to better understand the pathways through the latter years of school and beyond that these young people are taking, what's influencing their pathways and what more could be done to support them. The context for this research is the generally poorer school completion and post-school engagement outcomes of young people experiencing disadvantage, relative to their more affluent peers. Additionally, these young people were moving through and beyond school during COVID-19, which significantly impacted their experience of school, post-school study and employment.

The PET research is collecting a range of data through:

- Three surveys in 2021, 2022 and 2023 respectively
- Three interviews with a subset of young people who completed the survey in 2021, 2022 and 2023.
- Combining this new data with information collected since these young people began on *Learning for Life* (usually in primary school).

The PET project has had strong engagement from young people, with over 3,500 young people recently completing the third survey. These young people all live in low-income families across Australia, 15 percent are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and a high proportion (over a third) experience a health or mental health issue. The first publication from this research was released in September 2022, drawing on data from the Year 12 2020 cohort's first survey and interviews in 2021.<sup>1</sup> A copy of the first report is available at [https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/research/reports/2022\\_pathways-engagement-transitions-report.pdf](https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/research/reports/2022_pathways-engagement-transitions-report.pdf)

The first report identified a number of **enablers** for young people **completing Year 12** and transitioning to work and study and several **barriers** to them making successful **post-school transitions** as outlined below, which are of relevance to this Northern Territory review.

The **enablers** to completing Year 12 and transition to work and study were identified as:

- Support from a range of sources, particularly family and friends, as well as non-government organisations. This emphasises the importance of efforts aimed at increasing parental engagement in young people's learning and the role of school-community partnerships in supporting school engagement and completion.
- Work exposure, VET study and being able to try different career options while at school.
- High quality careers support while at school.

The **barriers** to completing Year 12 and making successful transitions that were identified by young people were:

- The COVID-19 pandemic which altered young people's experience of school, VET and employment.
- Limited study and work options in some areas or for some occupations.

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<sup>1</sup> The second publication from this research is due for release in mid July and will draw on the surveys and interviews completed by the Year 12 cohort in both 2021 and 2022.

- Difficulties in applying for post-school study and being first in their family to undertake such study.
- Mental health issues.

The vast majority (86 percent) of young people who were surveyed for the PET project recalled receiving **careers support** while at school. Of those who recalled receiving support, just over half (55 percent) indicated the support was helpful, 35 percent were unsure if it was, and 11 percent said it was not useful. Young people who did not complete Year 12 were less likely to recall receiving careers support, than those who completed Year 12, and less likely to find the careers support useful if they did recall it. Data from the PET research suggests a **wider array of careers support** and **more targeted** support for some groups of young people is necessary, to both support Year 12 completion and more positive post-school pathways.

The PET research identified the following recommendations for strengthening the school and post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage, and these are of direct relevance to this Review:

- 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 school 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.

### HIGH QUALITY TUTORING

As identified by the OECD above, **strong literacy and numeracy skills** are essential for all young people. They are a key pre-requisite for participation in secondary education and post-school employment and further study. The foundations of literacy and numeracy are laid prior to school and in primary school, but many students in the Northern Territory are starting high school without these necessary skills. This makes it very hard for them to participate in high school and can quickly contribute to disengagement. The 2022 NAPLAN data for the NT identifies how significant an issue this is, with 23 percent of Year 7 students whose parents did not complete Year 12 meeting the National Minimum Standard (NMS) in numeracy and 29 percent of this group meeting the NMS in reading. Efforts focused on improving the secondary school outcomes of young people in NT become critical.

Strong evidence has emerged (for example Productivity Commission 2022, Grattan Institute 2023, Education Endowment Foundation 2021) of the effectiveness of **tutoring**, both one-on-one and in small groups, for improving student literacy and numeracy outcomes. Tutoring is particularly beneficial in supporting lower achieving students who are behind their peers. The Grattan Institute (2023) states that “small group tuition...is among the most effective learning interventions available. Delivered well, it can add, on average, an extra four months of learning over a year, helping many students to catch-up. The economic benefits are also huge: if one-in-five (Australian) students received high quality small group tuition in 2023, they would collectively earn an extra \$6 billion over their lifetimes, about six times the annual cost of tutoring programs.”

In response to the anticipated impacts of COVID-19 on students experiencing disadvantage, The Smith Family developed, trialled and evaluated the **Catch-Up Learning** tutoring program to improve the literacy and numeracy of students in Years 4 and 8 who are on *Learning for Life*, and struggling in these areas. Core elements of *Catch-Up Learning* are:

- Online delivery by qualified teachers
- Home-based tutoring occurring outside school hours
- Students participating in up to three one-hour sessions a week for 20 weeks
- Sessions covering literacy and numeracy.

The program ran in 2021 with a group of around 100 students and in 2022 with a group of over 400 students, with the published evaluations of both showing students made strong progress in numeracy and literacy, their confidence and love of learning increased significantly and program attendance and completion were high.

In 2022:

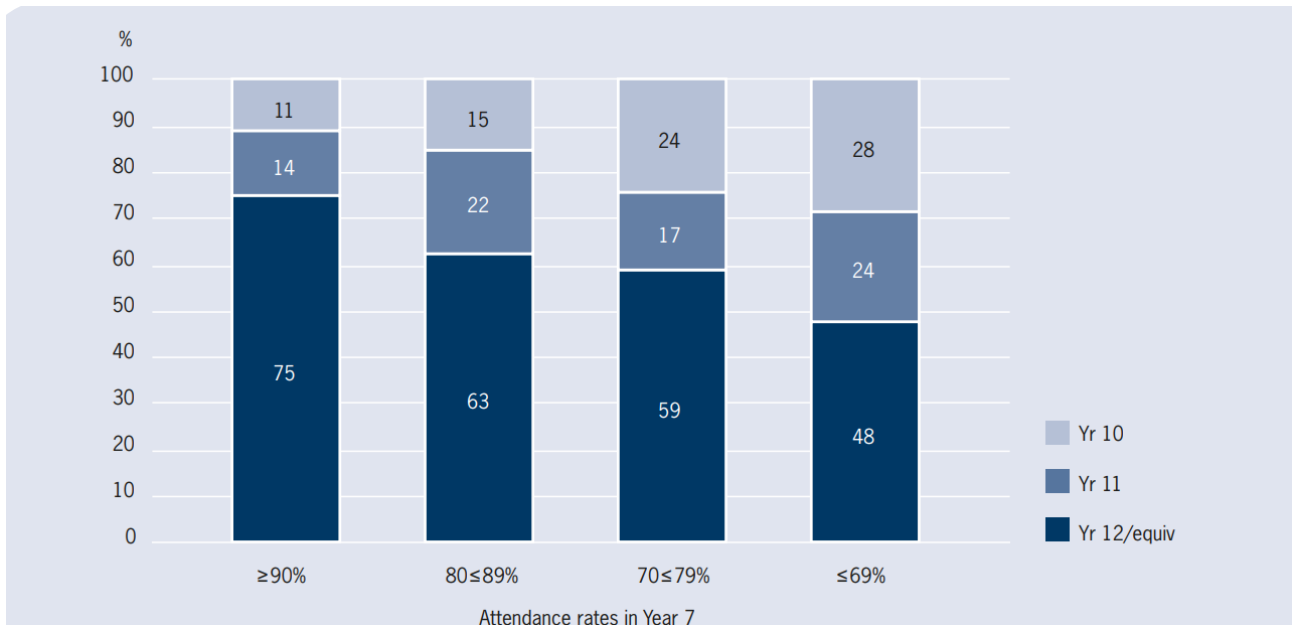
- At the end of the *Catch-Up Learning* program, two in three students had made greater progress in numeracy than would be expected over a six month period.
- More than half of the students had made greater than expected progress in literacy.
- Program completion was 83 percent and average program attendance was 86 percent.

High quality tutoring programs can support students experiencing disadvantage who are struggling in key educational areas such as literacy and numeracy to catch-up, including when they are in the early years of high school. If they can be supported to improve these critical skills, this increases the likelihood of them completing Year 12 and moving into work or study post-school.

## SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

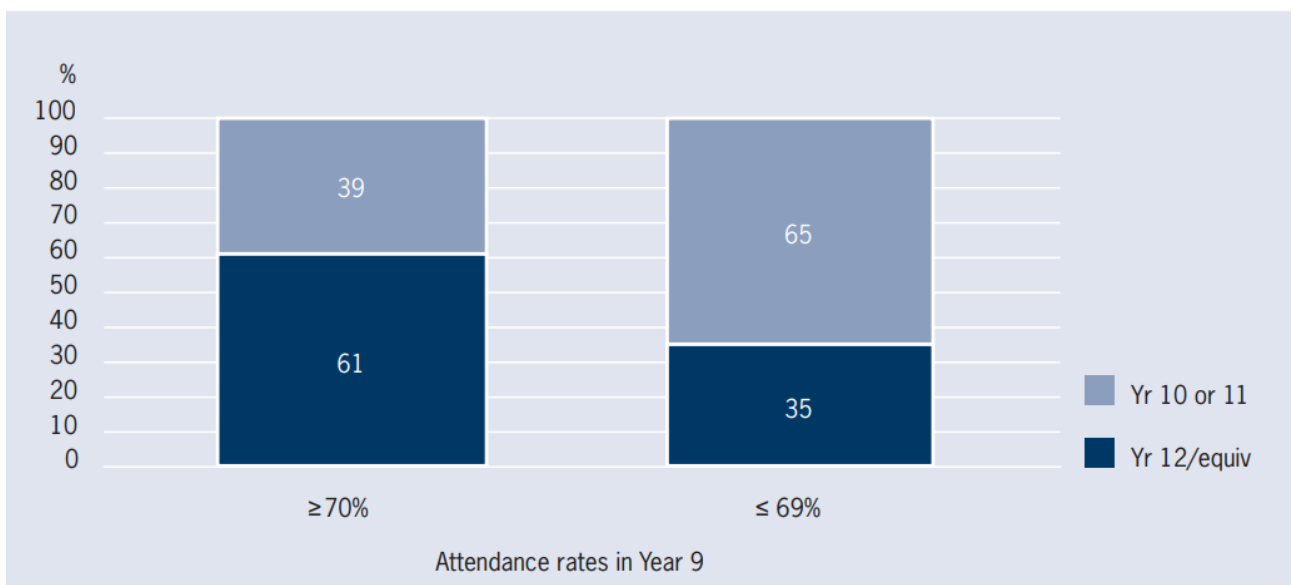
A range of research has identified the importance of school attendance for achievement, Year 12 completion and post-school engagement in work or study. Analysis by The Smith Family (2018) of educational data on *Learning for Life* students shows that school attendance in the early years of high school can help predict the likelihood of school completion, and hence identify students who may need additional support to stay engaged in education (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Highest year level completed 2014 to 2016 for *Learning for Life* students by Year 7 attendance rates



This data highlights the importance of **focussing on school attendance**, including in the secondary years. Of even more relevance to this Review is the evidence from the same analysis that low attendance in early high school is **‘recoverable’** and that early identification provides a real opportunity for targeted additional supports to bring students back on track. Figure 2 shows the longer-term benefit of improvements in attendance for high school students. Students with very low attendance rates in Year 7 who improved their attendance by Year 9, were much more likely to complete Year 12, compared to those students whose attendance remained very low<sup>2</sup>.

Figure 2: Highest year level completed 2014 to 2016 for *Learning for Life* students by attendance in Year 9 for those with very low attendance in Year 7



<sup>2</sup> 69 percent or below



### ELDERS IN SCHOOL

Central to supporting improved educational outcomes for young people in the Northern Territory is ensuring an educational system which is deeply respectful of and imbued by the **cultures** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

The Smith Family's **Elders in Schools program** is underpinned by a range of research including:

- 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).
- 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.

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 other 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 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 program's components include:

- **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 the 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.

**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 centrality of authentic contexts and connections to culture, family and community for young people's educational outcomes. Given the goals of this Secondary Education Review, there may be value in **expanding** this initiative to other secondary schools in the Northern Territory.

The Smith Family appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this important Review and would be happy to expand on any of the material contained in this submission.

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