



*everyone's family*

# Submission on the Interim report of the Productivity Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement

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## INTRODUCTION

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide a short response to the Interim Report of the Productivity Commission's Review into the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA). While cognisant of the importance of quality teaching and workforce issues to educational outcomes, given The Smith Family's focus on supporting children experiencing disadvantage to achieve educationally particularly in the context of their home learning environment, our comments focus on equity, data, evidence and accountability issues, rather than workforce issues.

## FOCUS OF THE NEXT AGREEMENT

A range of data clearly indicates that the NSRA's goal of equitable education for all students (in line with the Alice Springs Mparntwe Declaration), is far from being realised. This has been the persistent reality over many years and there is some evidence that gaps in educational outcomes for different cohorts of students (such as those from low SES) have increased due to the disproportionate impact of COVID on students. This is not in the best interests of individual students, nor the broader Australian community, at a time when economic<sup>1</sup> and social challenges are particularly heightened and show no signs of abating.

The Smith Family holds that the next Agreement should have a very strong focus on the goal of equitable education and that this will need a refined data agenda, greater links between policy deliberations, evidence informed interventions and what happens in schools, and stronger accountability mechanisms so progress can be tracked.

## UNIQUE STUDENT IDENTIFIER

The Smith Family strongly endorses the Commission's emphasis on the importance of implementing a Unique Student Identifier (USI) as a foundation for achieving high quality and equitable education. At an aggregate level, we see the USI as being linked to assessing students' progress over time, building the Australian educational evidence base and enhancing public accountability for the investments made in schooling. The limited progress on a USI despite long-standing jurisdictional agreement for such an initiative is deeply disappointing given the contribution we believe it can make to improving Australia's educational performance.

The Smith Family's experience with having a USI for students on our long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*, and more recently a data exchange initiative with the South Australian Department for Education (DfE), confirms its power and value. Our experience also confirms that important data security and privacy issues can be appropriately managed and parents/carers of students will embrace such initiatives if they understand their purpose is to provide more targeted and timely support for their children. Further information on The Smith Family's data exchange initiative with the SA DfE is available at

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7909784/game-changer-for-students-in-need/>

<https://www.ceda.com.au/NewsAndResources/Opinion/Economy/Building-better-futures-through-data>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example the concurrent inquiry by the Productivity Commission into Productivity.

## DATA AGENDA

Efforts aimed at improving Australia's performance in schools, including from an equity perspective, require a more refined data agenda than currently exists. Current challenges include the availability and timeliness of data on key equity cohorts and the exclusion of data on students with a disability and those in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC).

The most comprehensive analysis of educational data for various equity cohorts (by SES, Indigeneity and location) has been undertaken by Victoria University's Mitchell Institute<sup>2</sup>. The data included spans the early years, school, and post school employment and education and is able to show the links between outcomes across those three areas. While highly valuable some of the data it relies on includes the Census, which is undertaken every five years.

Further, as the Interim report notes, current data used to assess progress by equity groups under the NSRA relies on student information relating to one characteristic, for example, Indigeneity or SES. It doesn't for example provide a sense of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls or boys are doing and there is no inclusion of data on students with a disability, or on students in Out-of-Home Care, which are major gaps in the current approach which we believe needs to be rectified in a new NSRA. Available (but incomplete) data shows that as a group, young people in Out-of-Home Care have some of the poorest educational and life outcomes of all groups of young people.

The overlapping nature or relationship between some characteristics – such as SES and disability and SES and being in Out-of-Home Care – is a key consideration for better understanding how some of Australia's most disadvantaged students are performing. This is currently not possible under the NSRA. By way of example of the 60,000 low SES students supported by The Smith Family on our long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*, around one in three have a health or disability issue.

Similarly, small scale research initiatives have identified the value of more nuanced understandings which take account for example of gender and Indigeneity. Having this data available at the national level would inform policy and programmatic responses, with the likelihood of these responses leading to improved outcomes.

The Smith Family endorses the Interim Report's commentary – "Focussing on students who have fallen behind and are at most risk of staying behind would be a good place to start" and believes that enhanced data efforts along the lines suggested above would contribute to such efforts.

## TARGETED INTERVENTIONS AND THE NATIONAL EVIDENCE BASE

The Smith Family's research endorses the Interim Report's assessment that "targeted interventions are effective, particularly small group or one-to-one tuition". Our research with a new tutoring program, *Catch Up Learning* (see <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/research/catch-up-learning/catch-up-learning-research-report-final.pdf>) shows the value of tutoring for students from low SES backgrounds who are struggling in numeracy and literacy and highlights that such tutoring can also be effective when done at home and online.

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<sup>2</sup> Lamb S, Huo S, Walstab A, Wade A, Maire Q, Doecke E, Jackson J & Endekov Z, 2020 *Educational Opportunity in Australia 2020: Who succeeds and who misses out*. Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute: Melbourne.

The Smith Family has welcomed the establishment of the Australian Educational Research Organisation (AERO) and the role it will play over time in enhancing the Australian educational evidence base. Over time we hope that AERO will both support the identification of which interventions should be scaled and for which groups of students, as well as contributing to trialling new interventions and assessing their effectiveness.

In considering a process for what interventions to scale, we see the work of the UK's Education Endowment Foundation (see <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/>) as offering valuable insights. They emphasise for example a four staged approach from pilot study, to efficacy trial, effectiveness trial and finally scale up.

### WELLBEING

Research shows the relationship between wellbeing and educational outcomes and a range of data suggests that young people's wellbeing has been impacted by COVID-19. The Smith Family therefore is supportive of consideration being given to including a wellbeing focus in a new NSRA. We would note however that while a number of state/territory jurisdictions measure wellbeing for different cohorts of students (for example South Australia's Wellbeing and Engagement Collection, NSW's Tell Them from Me survey and Victoria's Student Health and Wellbeing Survey), and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) has developed the EI Pulse<sup>3</sup>, our understanding is that there is no national definition of student wellbeing or tool that is used nationally to assess and track it. This suggests that there would need to be very significant work done to meaningfully include a wellbeing focus in a new NSRA.

While welcoming such additional work, we would not want it to be at the expense of other key pieces of work that we believe are needed such as on the Unique Student Identifier and other data development work identified earlier in this submission.

### WHAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE NSRA

The Interim report notes (p 3) "While much can be done within education systems to lift student outcomes and make them more equitable, some barriers to education, such as secure housing tenure, are beyond the capacity of schools to address. The Commission has focused on factors that can operate 'within the school gates'".

While concurring with the first sentence, The Smith Family would argue that such a focus ultimately mitigates against the achievement of the goals of the NSRA – namely high quality schooling and equity. Given the increasingly complex social, economic and cultural environments young Australians are experiencing and the ongoing impacts of an unprecedented pandemic, we would also suggest that barriers to education are becoming more complex and dynamic, potentially meaning these goals will remain even harder to reach unless there is a systemic re-think. At a school and jurisdictional level, there is a range of activity underway focussed on re-designing the human services system to put the people it is designed to serve, including young people, at the centre. We think the time is right for consideration to be given to how such a lens can be reflected in important national agreements such as the NSRA.

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<sup>3</sup> A digitised program available via an App that provides a rapid wellbeing check-in for school students.