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# **Submission to the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee's Inquiry into the provisions of the *Australian Education Bill 2012***

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## A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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A well educated population is the key to Australia's economic and social prosperity now and into the future. However recent national and international data confirms the major educational challenges facing Australia. Significant numbers of children and young people are not meeting national and international educational benchmarks, performance in a number of areas has flat lined or declined, there are major equity gaps in the performance of different groups of young people, and at the same time, many other nations have improved their educational performance. In addition, current school funding arrangements are complex, inconsistent and ineffective and not able to address the significant educational challenges facing Australia.

The Smith Family is therefore very supportive of the general thrust of the *Australian Education Bill, 2012* which has as its objects the goal of a high quality and highly equitable schooling system. It is also very supportive of the proposal to allocate school funding on the basis of need and to recognise the educational disadvantage associated with a student being for example, of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or of low socioeconomic background.

School education has a crucial role to play not only in the economic wellbeing of individuals and Australia as a whole, but in the social and cultural wellbeing of both individuals and the nation. The Smith Family would therefore urge that the *Australian Education Bill, 2012*, particularly the Preamble, be revised to reflect a more comprehensive view of the purpose of school education. Both the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* offer guidance on a how a much broader and more holistic perspective on the goals of education could be articulated within the Bill.

### **Recommendation 1**

That the Preamble be revised to reflect a more comprehensive view of the purpose of school education, drawing on documents such as the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*.

Not-for-profit community organisations can and are facilitating the type of deep and long-term school-community relationships which contribute to improving the wellbeing of children and young people. This should be explicitly acknowledged in the Bill.

### **Recommendation 2**

That the Bill explicitly acknowledge in the Preamble (as a minimum), the key role not-for-profit community organisations play in supporting improved educational outcomes.

Current monitoring arrangements and the use of research and evaluation to drive improved student outcomes are not as strong as they need to be. Future funding arrangements must be based on the evidence of what contributes to high quality and high equity education. Research and evaluation findings must be used to inform what happens in schools, and resources allocated to appropriate interventions, supports and pedagogies that are responsive to student circumstances and needs.

### Recommendation 3

Future school funding arrangements must ensure better monitoring and evaluation of programs and initiatives and more robust nationally comparable data on funding and outcomes for disadvantaged students. Timeframes for monitoring improvement in student outcomes should be realistic and reflect the time that may be required to support the improved performance of highly disadvantaged students.

In The Smith Family's view, the most important priority direction for a national plan for improving the performance of schools and students is *meeting student need* followed by *quality learning*. Other important priorities such as quality teaching, empowered school leadership and transparency and accountability should be seen as contributing to the other two more significant priorities.

### Recommendation 4

That *meeting student need* be the first principle of the national plan identified in the *Australian Education Bill 2012*, followed by *quality learning*.

Local leaders can be well placed to understand their community's needs, take ownership for them and plan and implement responses to address them. However the principle of local autonomy can be challenging to effectively implement in highly disadvantaged communities. These communities are often characterised by a scarcity of services and opportunities which places an undue burden on schools. They may lack the financial and other resources and networks which it is assumed will be harnessed through a local autonomy approach. Attracting quality principals and staff to schools in disadvantaged, regional and remote communities can also be difficult and devolution places significantly more demands on staff. Further, public accountability of a very atomised schooling system is more difficult if responsibility for educational outcomes is moved from Governments and central Departments to individual schools.

Principles of empowered local leadership and local school autonomy must be complemented by an approach which provides sufficient strategy, support and training at a system level to enable school leaders and their school boards and councils to plan well and make good decisions for their students and families. Core competencies in key educational areas, such as working with Indigenous children or children with a disability should also be retained at a system level to ensure both effectiveness and efficiency. Expecting all schools to have the level of competency they need in many the areas that will be relevant to their student population is very unwise, particularly given the multiple needs schools serving disadvantaged students may have. Local autonomy principles should also be complemented by appropriate monitoring and accountability at State/Territory and Commonwealth levels of educational outcomes, including for groups of students such as those from low SES.

### Recommendation 5

The principle of local autonomy should be complemented by a national framework which allows for appropriate monitoring and accountability at State/Territory and Commonwealth levels. Core competencies in key educational policy areas (such as Indigenous education) should be retained at a system level, in order to ensure both effectiveness and efficiency.

The Smith Family notes that there is sufficient detail still to be worked out regarding much of the implementation of a new school funding approach, including the quantum of funds available, the respective contribution of various governments, and the important monitoring and accountability mechanisms which will operate. The *Australian Education Bill 2012* provides the legislative framework for significant reform of schooling in Australia and The Smith Family welcomes the public scrutiny which is occurring regarding the Bill, including through this Inquiry. The Smith Family would urge that the development and implementation of related policy also include significant consultation and discussion with all key stakeholders, including not-for-profit community organisations.

## B. BACKGROUND ON THE SMITH FAMILY

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The Smith Family is a national, independent charity committed to increasing the educational participation and achievement of Australian children and young people in need. Our belief is that every child deserves a chance and our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need, by providing long-term support for their participation in education.

In 2011-12, The Smith Family supported over 106,000 children, young people and parents/carers nationally. This included:

- Over 34,000 young people on an educational scholarship.
- Close to 39,000 children, young people and parents/carers through our *Learning for life* programs including early literacy and numeracy programs, a peer mentoring reading program, primary and secondary after school support, and an on-line mentoring program for high school students to support their career and post-school plans.
- An additional 33,000 children, young people and parents/carers supported through a range of government funded programs such as the Commonwealth Government's *Communities for Children* and *Partnership Brokers* initiatives.
- Fourteen percent of the young people we support identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Smith Family has identified three long-term high level outcomes as the focus of its work with disadvantaged children and young people. They are to:

- Increase school attendance to 90%.
- Increase the proportion of Year 10 students who advance to Year 12 or equivalent.
- Increase the proportion of young people in education, training and/or work post school.

These are complementary to the education and transition goals identified by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

The Smith Family's core focus on the long term educational participation of disadvantaged children and young people means that it has a keen interest in educational public policy including the *Australian Education Bill, 2012*.

The context for the *Australian Education Bill, 2012* includes the role a well educated population will play in Australia's future prosperity, the educational challenges currently facing Australia and the complexity of existing school funding arrangements.

### **Australia's future prosperity and current educational challenge**

A well educated population is the key to Australia's economic and social prosperity now and into the future. Providing all Australians with the opportunity to realise their potential is central to enhancing Australia's overall productivity and ultimately will benefit our nation as a whole.

However, recent data from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and the COAG Reform Council shows the extent of the educational challenge facing Australia:

- A quarter of Australian Year 4 students were at or below the international 'low' reading benchmark<sup>1</sup>.
- Results in maths and science have generally flat lined since 2011, with Australia's Year 4 students ranked 18<sup>th</sup> for maths and 25<sup>th</sup> for science out of 50 countries.
- Educational outcomes for Indigenous students are still a long way behind non-Indigenous students and outcomes for young people from low socio-economic status (SES) have not improved in recent years. There is a gap of up to 16 percentage points between the proportions of high SES students and those from low SES who are meeting national minimum reading standards.
- There has been no significant improvement in the Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate for 20 to 24 year olds in any Australian jurisdiction between 2008 and 2011.
- The proportion of young people successfully moving from school to work and further study in 2011 remains below the level in 2008.

(Martin M et al, 2012 and COAG Reform Council, 2012)

In addition, the relationship between student background and educational outcomes is more pronounced in Australia than in other comparable high performing OECD countries such as Canada. Further, the gap between Australia's performance and that of other nations, including a number of our near neighbours, is significant, placing in jeopardy our long term international competitiveness. As our population ages and our prosperity becomes more reliant on knowledge and service based industries, Australian employers will struggle to fill job vacancies unless we substantially increase the fundamental skills of young Australians and school attainment rates.

### **Australia's current school funding arrangements**

The current funding arrangements for schools are complex, inconsistent and ineffective. There have been historical and piecemeal changes over 40 years which have created multiple funding models for schools and an overall framework that lacks a coherent rational basis. Current

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<sup>1</sup> Students are graded across 5 groupings – 'below low', 'low', 'intermediate', 'high' and 'advanced'.

## C. CONTEXT



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arrangements cannot address the long tail of educational disadvantage and they lack sufficiently robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms to drive the necessary improvements.

The Smith Family has some overarching comments on the *Australian Education Bill, 2012* as well as some specific comments on particular sections of the Bill.

### **A high quality and high equity schooling system**

The Smith Family welcomes the broad thrust of the *Australian Education Bill, 2012* introduced into federal parliament in November 2012, given its commitment to both a high quality and high equity schooling system (identified in both the *Objects* and *Preamble*) and, its commitment to funding based on student need (identified in Section 9). These commitments, enshrined as they are in national legislation, mark an important step towards addressing the significant educational challenges facing Australia which were identified in Section C of this submission.

The Smith Family would argue that the *Objects* relating to equity and excellence should be seen as the primary objects of the Bill. The Smith Family understands the desire to set a publicly articulated overall goal for Australia's schooling system and to set that at a challenging level that involves international comparisons. However it would note that this could lead to a too narrow focus on the purpose of education (see comments below re *A broader vision for education*) and could possibly dilute the importance focus on equity.

### **The Preamble**

#### **A broader vision for school education**

The Bill's Preamble emphasises the important relationship between a high quality and high equity education system, a highly skilled workforce and Australia's economic prosperity. While this relationship is a very important one, The Smith Family would argue that a broader vision for the purpose of school education should be included within the Bill. The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* provide direction on a stronger and more complete vision for Australia's education system.

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* which identifies in Article 29 that signatories agree that the education of children should be directed to:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.



The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* was signed in 2008 by the Australian Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. As well as identifying the goal of equity and excellence for Australian schooling, the Declaration identified the goal that all young Australians be: successful learners; confident and creative individuals; and active and informed citizens. It also notes that 'improving educational outcomes for all young Australians will position young people to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives.' The Declaration identified that 'schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion'. (MCEETYA, 2008)

Both the United Nations Convention and the Melbourne Declaration provide a much broader and more holistic perspective on the goal of education, both for individual children and young people and the nation as a whole, than that currently offered by the *Australian Education Bill, 2012*. School education has a crucial role to play not only in the economic wellbeing of individuals and Australia as a whole, but in the social and cultural wellbeing of both individuals and the nation. The Smith Family would therefore urge that the Preamble to the *Australian Education Bill 2012*, be revised to reflect this more comprehensive view.

### Recommendation 1

That the Preamble be revised to reflect a more comprehensive view of the purpose of school education, drawing on documents such as the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*.

### Partnerships and the role of non-government organisations

The Preamble currently acknowledges the importance of partnerships across the community to support all school students. The Smith Family strongly agrees that diverse and multi-level partnerships are required, particularly in disadvantaged communities, if all Australian children and young people are to realise their full potential. A recently released report from the Harvard Family Research Project notes that 'The central role of schools in *partnerships for learning* is especially important in inner-cities and low income communities where children's lack of access to needed services, tends to interfere with their learning' (Harris and Wilkes, 2013, p.2).

Strong and deep school-community partnerships:

- Enable earlier identification of children and young people's needs and quicker access to services.
- Increase their engagement and participation in school.
- Improve their educational outcomes.
- Improve their self-confidence and well-being.
- Create a more positive school environment.
- Improve family engagement in the school.
- Build community connectedness and capacity.

- Widen schools' external contacts, networks and partnerships and enhance social capital. (Black et al 2010)

Not-for-profit community organisations can and are facilitating the type of deep and long-term school-community relationships which contribute to improving the wellbeing of children and young people. The rationale and evidence for the role of NGOs in deep school-community partnerships includes:

- Creating and maintaining effective cross-sectoral partnerships that help address educational inequity is not easy (Department for Victorian Communities, 2007).
- Building and sustaining the effective partnerships required in disadvantaged communities requires a complex mix of skills.
- Facilitating deep and long-term relationships which contribute to improving the wellbeing of children and young people is a 'core competency' of many not-for-profit community organisations.
- Having a not-for-profit community organisation as facilitator/lead agency reduces the burden of partnership development and management on school staff and enables complementarity with school staff's core educational skills.
- Not-for-profit community organisations can bring a range of business, community and council groups to support educational initiatives in disadvantaged communities.
- Credible intermediaries can address school leaders' concerns regarding the match between what a school needs and what potential partners may offer. They can also help mediate the cultural barriers between sectors (Victorian Department of Education, 2009).
- The effectiveness and value of not-for-profit community organisations taking on a key facilitation role has been demonstrated by the evaluation of initiatives such as the Commonwealth Government's *Communities for Children* program (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009).

There are countless examples from across Australia of not-for-profit community organisations playing a significant role in improving the educational outcomes of children and young people through a partnership approach. The Preamble to the *Australian Education Bill 2012* currently makes mention of partnerships between 'teachers, parents and families, and employers.' The Smith Family would strongly urge that the Preamble (as a minimum) explicitly acknowledge the key role Non-Government Organisations are playing in supporting improved educational outcomes.

### **Recommendation 2**

That the Bill explicitly acknowledge in the Preamble (as a minimum), the key role not-for-profit community organisations play in supporting improved educational outcomes.

### **Investing based on the evidence of what works**

In addition to supporting the high quality and high equity focus identified in the Preamble, The Smith Family also strongly supports the need for future arrangements to be based on the evidence of what contributes to such education. Research and evaluation findings must be used to inform what happens in schools, and resources allocated to appropriate interventions, supports and pedagogies that are responsive to student circumstances and needs.

The details of how this commitment will be embedded in arrangements between the Commonwealth and the States/Territories, while not the domain of legislation, needs to be thought through, as Australia does not have a strong record in this regard. The Federal Review of School Funding identified that more than 40% of the 143 educational programs funded to support disadvantaged students did not report any evaluation being undertaken. Of those that did, only a small number examined the program's impact on learning.

There were insufficient data available to establish to what extent existing programs (targeting disadvantaged students) are effective in reducing the impact of disadvantage on educational outcomes because few have been evaluated, and fewer still have been evaluated with student outcomes as a focus...The study was unable to discern the extent to which specific Indigenous and Low SES programs were effective. (ACER, 2011)

Future arrangements for school funding need to ensure better monitoring and evaluation of programs and initiatives and more robust nationally comparable data on funding and outcomes for disadvantaged students.

### **Recommendation 3**

Future school funding arrangements must ensure better monitoring and evaluation of programs and initiatives and more robust nationally comparable data on funding and outcomes for disadvantaged students. Timeframes for monitoring improvement in student outcomes should be realistic and reflect the time that may be required to support the improved performance of highly disadvantaged students.

### **Part 2 of the Bill: Improving the performance of schools and school students**

The Smith Family is cognisant of the constitutional responsibilities of the States/Territories to deliver school education. It does however strongly support the development by the Commonwealth, in partnership with the Governments of the States and Territories and non-government education authorities, of a national plan to improve school performance. The importance of quality schooling to the overall wellbeing of Australia now and into the future, and the current poor educational performance of significant numbers of young Australians, demands such a national plan.

Clause 7 of the Bill identifies five directions of reform for a national plan to improve the performance of schools and students:

1. Quality teaching
2. Quality learning
3. Empowered school leadership
4. Transparency and accountability
5. Meeting student need.

While all of these areas are important, The Smith Family would argue that the principle of meeting student need, (currently listed last of the areas identified), should be listed first, followed by quality learning. Addressing student needs in an integrated and holistic way, including through school-community partnerships, and providing all young people with quality learning, ought to be seen as the key priorities of efforts aimed at improving Australia's educational performance. Reforms related to teacher quality, empowering school leadership and transparency and accountancy, while important, should be seen as contributing to achieving the more significant goals of meeting student need and quality learning.

#### **Recommendation 4**

That *meeting student need* be the first principle of the national plan identified in the *Australian Education Bill 2012*, followed by *quality learning*.

#### **Teacher quality**

There is currently significant attention at both Commonwealth and State/Territory levels on improving teacher quality and this is possibly why this area has been listed first in the reform directions identified in the Bill. While evidence shows the role of teachers and what they do in the classroom is important in improving educational outcomes, it also shows a much broader perspective is required. Professor John Hattie's meta-analysis examines six factors (the child, home, school, teacher, curriculum and approaches to teaching) and assesses their contributions to student achievement. Professor Hattie notes that students account for 'about 50% of the variance of achievement', while 'teachers account for about 30% of the variance' (Hattie, 2003).

A synthesis of Professor Hattie's research by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development noted that:

The child or student brings to school factors that influence achievement (from preschool, home, and genetics) as well as a set of personal dispositions that can have marked effect on the outcomes of schooling. The home can either nurture and support achievement of students, or it can be harmful and destructive. Hattie also suggests that positive expectations from the parents can be critical to the success of children. (DEECD, 2010).

Thus, as the Productivity Commission has noted 'given the varied and complex ways in which these factors can influence students' educational experiences, schools workforce policy is just one part of a wider suite of responses needed to address educational disadvantage' (Productivity Commission, 2012 p 254). Ensuring the emphasis on teacher quality in a national plan for school improvement is at an appropriate level and in line with the available research, will be important if significant educational gains are to be made.

### **Empowered school leadership**

The Smith Family is supportive of empowering school leaders and communities to 'make decisions and implement strategies at the local level to obtain the best outcomes for their schools and school students' (Section 7, 3 of the Act). As an organisation working in 97 local communities across Australia, it understands that local leaders can be best placed to understand their community's needs, take ownership for them and plan and implement responses to address them. However The Smith Family is also cognisant that it can be particularly challenging for schools in disadvantaged communities to implement local school autonomy approaches and realise the expected gains for disadvantaged children and young people.

The areas where many disadvantaged families live are often characterised by a scarcity of services and opportunities, which places an undue burden on schools in these areas (Skatterbol et al 2012). These communities can also lack financial and other resources, including the networks of skilled parents, community members, businesses etc which it is assumed will be harnessed through a local school autonomy approach. Further, attracting quality principals and staff to schools in disadvantaged, regional and remote communities can be difficult, and devolution places significantly more demands on staff, including the need to manage significant funding. Public accountability of a very atomised schooling system is also more difficult if responsibility for educational outcomes is moved from Governments and central Departments to individual schools.

There are a range of forms of school autonomy being currently implemented around the world. They include academies in England, charter schools in the United States and stand-alone government independent schools in New Zealand. The evidence of the impact of school autonomy and market mechanisms in education is mixed, both between and within countries.

New Zealand has had its approach in place for well over a decade. While school management has become more entrepreneurial, evidence suggests that many schools are adopting enrolment management practices to shape their intake and their position in the market, thereby limiting opportunity for poorer students. Students from more 'deprived' communities are likely to be excluded from the most desirable schools and have fewer educational options, mostly involving poorer quality schools (Lubienski and Lee, 2013).

Evidence from the UK's Academies suggests there is no 'academy effect' but considerable variability, with disadvantaged young people generally doing no better in academies than in other schools (Wrigley and Kalambouka, 2012). Charter schools in the US show some students benefit

and some don't. A large study in 16 states showed that 17% of charter school students outperformed an imaginary twin in a public school, 46% performed equally well and 37% performed worse. In primary and middle school charter students performed better but they did worse in high school (OECD, 2010).

In light of the above and the evidence of successful national/state-local initiatives such as Communities for Children, The Smith Family would argue that the principle of empowered local leadership and local school autonomy must be complemented by an approach which provides sufficient strategy, support and training at a system level to enable school leaders and their school boards and councils to plan well and make good decisions for their students.

Responsibility for improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students should also not be seen as the sole responsibility of an individual school. The principle of local autonomy should be complemented by a national framework which allows for appropriate monitoring and accountability at State/Territory and Commonwealth levels. Core competencies in key educational policy areas (eg Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with a disability etc) should also be retained at a system level to ensure both effectiveness and efficiency. Expecting all schools to have the level of competency they need in the many areas that will be relevant to their student population is very unwise, particularly given the multiple needs schools serving disadvantaged students may have.

### **Recommendation 5**

The principle of local autonomy should be complemented by a national framework which allows for appropriate monitoring and accountability at State/Territory and Commonwealth levels. Core competencies in key educational policy areas (such as Indigenous education) should be retained at a system level in order to ensure both effectiveness and efficiency.

### **Developing benchmarks and supporting improvement, Section 8**

The Smith Family supports the development of benchmarks, outlined in Section 8 of the Bill, which aim to support the improved performance of schools and students. It would argue however that these should not be used in a punitive sense, particularly at the individual school level, but rather to identify those schools where more support is required. The Smith Family would also urge that timeframes for monitoring improvement in student outcomes be realistic and reflect the time that may be required to support improved performance of highly disadvantaged students.

### **School Funding Section 9**

The Smith Family strongly supports the allocation of school funding based on need and the recognition in Section 9 of the Bill of the educational disadvantage associated with:

- A student:
  - having a disability
  - being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

- being of low socioeconomic status and/or
- not being proficient in English
- The size of a student's school
- The location of a student's school.

Research and The Smith Family's work confirms the significant educational disadvantage that students with these characteristics may experience. In addition, as indicated above in the section on empowered local leadership, there are particular challenges for schools operating in highly disadvantaged communities.

The application of this new funding approach gives rise to significant additional investment being required from the Commonwealth and the States/Territories. In The Smith Family's view the future wellbeing of individual young Australians, their families, communities, and the nation as a whole, justifies such investment. As the Productivity Commission (2012) has recently noted:

A well-performing schooling system is fundamental to Australia's future...It is essential to foster the skills, innovativeness and adaptability needed to prosper in competitive global markets and to encourage more people to enter and remain in the workforce. Just as importantly, a well performing schooling system can promote equality of opportunity, facilitate a cohesive and inclusive society, and provide personal enrichment for individuals.

Given Australia's current educational performance and the importance to the nation of lifting this performance, The Smith Family would strongly argue that this investment is warranted and long overdue.

### **Concluding comments**

The Smith Family notes that there is sufficient detail still to be worked out regarding much of the implementation of a new school funding approach, including the quantum of funds available, the respective contribution of various governments, and the important monitoring and accountability mechanisms which will operate. The *Australian Education Bill 2012* provides the legislative framework for significant reform of schooling in Australia and The Smith Family welcomes the public scrutiny which is occurring regarding the Bill, including through this Inquiry. The Smith Family would urge that the development and implementation of related policy also include significant consultation and discussion with all key stakeholders, including not-for-profit community organisations.

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