



everyone's family

**The Smith Family's submission to the
Senate Committee
*Teacher and Learning inquiry***

October 2012

1. Background on The Smith Family

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.

The Smith Family provides holistic and long-term support for children and young people, from pre-school, through primary and secondary school and on to tertiary studies. We understand, and aim to positively enhance, the multiple influences on the wellbeing of children and young people, including their:

- Personal characteristics/attributes
- Family
- Peers
- Learning and care institutions, eg schools, early learning and care centres
- Community and society.

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* suite of programs. These programs include early literacy and numeracy programs (*Let's Read* and *Let's Count*), a peer mentoring reading program (*Student 2 Student*), primary and secondary after school support (*Learning Clubs*) and an on-line mentoring program for high school students to support their career and post-school plans (*i-Track*).
- A further close to 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 greater than or equal 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.

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

The range of programs and support we offer across the life course of children and young people, targeting different stages of their development, as well as providing supports to their families and communities, are all focused on supporting children and young people to achieve these outcomes.

This submission draws on The Smith Family's long history of both delivering programs to children, young people and their families, and undertaking research, evaluation and policy development in this area. Given The Smith Family's broad systems approach, this submission will first identify some of the broader issues and approaches which can help to maximise Australia's investment in schooling before turning to some more micro issues.

2. Context for this inquiry: The educational challenge facing Australia

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to contribute to national policy discussions regarding how Australia can maximize the return on its investment in schools. It would urge that this Senate Committee Inquiry take a comprehensive perspective on how Australia can achieve the highest return on this investment given the multiple components required to realise this goal. The Smith Family would also argue that the deliberations of the Inquiry should take into account the significant educational challenges currently facing Australia.

Australia's future prosperity

The key to Australia's economic and social wellbeing, now and into the future, is a highly educated population. This is the foundation for ensuring Australia is able to meet the challenges and opportunities of a highly volatile global economy. As the Productivity Commission 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 (Productivity Commission, 2012).

The emphasis of the Commission on the 'schooling system' is important context for this current Senate Inquiry.

Not all young Australians are achieving positive outcomes

Despite recent educational reforms, significant numbers of young Australians are not achieving key educational outcomes and making positive transitions to further education, training and employment. This is at a time when the educational performance of a number of our neighbours has improved. The Productivity Commission recently noted that Australia's schooling system 'is serving many, but not all students well' (Productivity Commission, 2012, p 41). Data which highlights the educational challenge facing Australia includes:

- Year 12 completion rates are significantly lower for Australian students from low SES than for students from high SES – 56% compared to 75% (DEEWR, 2011).
- Thirty one percent of Indigenous Year 5 students are below the national minimum standard for reading, compared to only 5% of non-Indigenous students (ACARA, 2011).

Of particular concern to The Smith Family is the fact that the relationship between student background and educational outcomes is more pronounced in Australia than in other comparable, high performing OECD countries and the performance gap between Australia's low SES and high SES students is wider than the OECD average. As the Productivity Commission has noted:

Australia does not perform as well as comparable countries in giving students equal opportunity to realise their educational potential, irrespective of their background or ability. The resulting educational disadvantage is particularly evident among Australian students who are Indigenous, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have a disability or other special needs, or reside in a rural or remote area (Productivity Commission, 2012, p 41).

The individual and collective impact on Australia of not addressing this situation is significant. Young people with poor educational outcomes are more likely to experience unemployment and poorer health outcomes, and rely more heavily on income support payments. This creates additional economic and social costs for individuals and the community as a whole. The Smith Family would

argue that it is within this context that the Senate's Inquiry into Teaching and Learning should be viewed.

3. Factors influencing student outcomes

Any efforts aimed at 'maximising our investment in Australian schools' - which The Smith Family takes to mean maximising the *return* on the investment made - must be cognisant of the multiple factors which influence student outcomes. Professor John Hattie's meta-analysis is one of the most frequently referenced studies with regards to student achievement. It examines six factors (the child, home, school, teacher, curriculum and approaches to teaching) and assesses their contributions to achievement. While there are acknowledged inherent strengths and limitations to a meta-analysis, Professor Hattie's work offers important insights on the range of factors which impact on outcomes. This work is supported by the ecological framework for children's development (first articulated by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1974) which underpins the work of The Smith Family.

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....In regards to the school, his research suggests that the most powerful effects relate to features within the school, such as the climate of the classroom, peer influences, and the lack of disruptive students in the classroom. There are a number of teacher contributions to student learning, such as teacher expectations; teachers' conception of teaching; and teacher openness. Hattie argues that the most critical aspect contributed by the teacher is the quality of their teaching as perceived by the students (DEECD, 2010).

Professor Hattie notes that students account for 'about 50% of the variance of achievement', while 'teachers account for about 30% of the variance. It is what teachers know, do and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation' (Hattie, 2003).

Thus, while the role of teachers and what they do in the classroom is important in improving educational outcomes, a much broader perspective is required if Australia is to maximize its return on investment in schools. As the Productivity Commission 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).

4. Hearing directly from young people

Making a difference

The Smith Family would argue that a key input to the Senate Inquiry should be the direct voices and experiences of young people themselves, who are after all the major 'participants' in Australia's schooling system and have much to gain if investment in schooling can be maximized. The Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW, in partnership with a range of government and non-government organisations, including The Smith Family, has recently concluded the four year *Making a difference* research project which explored young people's experiences of economic adversity. The study involved interviews with close to 100 economically disadvantaged young people living in eight communities across Australia, as well as interviews with 13 parents/carers and 24 service providers. These in-depth interviews took place over an 18 month period. The research explored the lived experiences of these young people and sought to bring their voices to national

discussions regarding poverty and disadvantage. It had a particular focus on locational and educational disadvantage and the interplay between the quality of home, neighbourhood and school environments, and disadvantage.

The findings from the report highlight that Australia still has some way to go if we are to realise the agreed goals for all young Australians articulated in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008). *Making a difference* found that young people:

- Chose schools and subjects where costs were lower, in order to place as small a financial burden on their families as possible. This included them opting to not do subjects they were naturally interested in or gifted at, because of costs. For some, this resulted in less engagement in school, decreased self esteem and wellbeing, and more limited future opportunities.
- Chose not to go on school excursions or camps, despite the learning and peer engagement opportunities they provided, because of costs.
- Didn't participate in sports or extracurricular activities because of costs.
- Adapted their preferences re schools, subjects and extracurricular activities.
- Who regularly missed out on the experiences and activities accessible to their peers, narrowed their interests and desires as a way of protecting themselves and their parents from having to say 'no'.

The Smith Family would argue that the above is an indication that some families do not have access to all the resources they need to ensure that their child is able to receive a 'quality education' (Terms of Reference c).

The research also found that:

- Where schools and community facilities were not well maintained, young people took that as a reflection on the level of respect in which they were held.
- Where learning environments were poorly maintained, young people were less likely to articulate a strong sense of themselves as learners or to sense they were valued by the school.

The communities where many of the young people lived were characterised by a scarcity of services and opportunities such as sport and recreational facilities, public spaces, quality housing, good transport, and access to adequate and secure employment. Local infrastructure and services provided by councils, state and federal governments shape the local dynamics which impact on young people's learning. These are part of the critical fabric which enables Australia to maximise its investment in schools. In areas where there are shortfalls in these areas of provision, *Making a difference* found that there is an undue burden placed on schools which are the main and sometimes only site where social policy interacts directly and universally with the lives of children and young people. Without an adequate base of broad community resources and supports within a community, investments in Australian schools are unlikely to maximise their returns.

As well as identifying some of the areas where further effort is required if all children and young people are to realise their potential, the *Making a difference* research highlighted a number of solutions, directly informed by the young people themselves, including:

- The importance in high poverty contexts of affordable opportunity structures for children and young people (sports clubs, arts based programs, work opportunities etc). These opportunity structures need to be responsive to local dynamics and actively promote diverse social networks. Rich learning experiences in schools and out of schools (including creative enrichment, mentoring, recreational, etc) that enable young people to mix widely, at low or

no cost to families, are critically important so young people experiencing economic adversity *'can participate on an equal footing'*.

- Schools need to be responsive and respectful of complex family circumstances.
- Strong school-community partnerships can bring a whole range of resources and opportunities together and provide a key platform for supporting the improved wellbeing of children and young people.
- Place-based responses are critical, as are well maintained and resourced local environments, secure affordable housing, integrated educational provision, and infrastructure that connects people to strong labour markets.

The Smith Family would argue that it is this broader understanding of factors impacting on educational outcomes and the need for comprehensive and integrated responses which include, but are far from limited to, improvements in teacher quality, which will best enable Australia to maximise its investment in education.

5. New forms of school-community partnerships

The *Making a difference* research, combined with growing international evidence and The Smith Family's experience piloting school-community partnerships across Australia, confirms that new forms of school-community partnerships are a core platform for Australia maximising its investment in schooling, particularly in areas of significant disadvantage. Schools in disadvantaged communities cannot be expected to bear the sole responsibility for the educational outcomes of the children and young people in their care, given the resources available to them and the general shortfall in services and infrastructure provision that their communities experience.

School-Community Partnerships are also known in Australia as extended service schools, full-service schools, or community schools. In these different incarnations they represent a comprehensive partnership model that has been extensively trialed and evaluated, particularly in the UK. In Victoria, this type of partnership has been described as 'schools delivering extended services to the community, either on site at the school or off site at a nearby venue. These activities are delivered before, during and after school hours through genuine partnerships with external agencies.' These may include before or after-school programs, adult learning opportunities or community use of school facilities. Similarly the United States' Coalition for Community Schools describes this type of partnership as both a place and a set of partnerships between school and community. It has an integrated focus on academics, youth development, family support, health, social services and community development. By extending the school day and week, it reaches families and community residents.

A recent Foundation for Young Australians literature review (Black et al 2010) outlined a number of ways that effective extended service school models have been shown to benefit young people. They:

- 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 communication between schools and families.
- Improve family engagement in the school.
- Build community connectedness and capacity.
- Widen schools' external contacts, networks and partnerships and enhance social capital.

Thus there are gains for individuals, families, institutions, systems and communities in such approaches and this in turn contributes to maximising the investment made in schools.

It is clear that as well as improvements in student outcomes, school-community partnerships can serve as a mechanism for developing stronger service delivery between schools and other service departments, such as public housing or health services (University of Ballarat 2011). A recent essay on school-community collaborations by the Australian Council for Educational Research found that:

Governments, too, benefit from schools connecting more strongly with business and community groups. These kinds of relationships can help grow local economies and potentially reduce the costs of service provision through less duplication of services and shared responsibility (Lonsdale et al, 2012).

A number of school-community partnership approaches are currently being implemented around Australia, such as the Extended School Hub pilots being run by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and in which as a non-government agency, The Smith Family is playing a lead role. At their best, these approaches:

- Acknowledge the multiple factors that influence educational outcomes for children and young people.
- Emphasise that the role of schools is to prepare young people for life and to create a foundation of *learning to learn*, rather than preparing them for a specific and potentially time-limited career.
- Have a strong focus on relationships, both at the individual level and also between agencies and institutions at a systems level.
- Have a strong focus on the voice of young people themselves within the planning, design and implementation stages.
- Have clearly defined outcomes which are seen as the collective responsibility of a range of parties and accountability processes which allow for ongoing improvement.
- Move well beyond 'joined up' service delivery to fundamental paradigm shifts which centre on the young-person and take account of the multiple life contexts and identities of students in the 21st century.

In The Smith Family's view, supporting schools in disadvantaged communities to leverage the resources, skills and support from beyond the school system, which would enable them to play a bigger role in enhancing the wellbeing of children and young people, and hence maximise investment in schooling, presents significant challenges. It sees the school-community partnership model as providing an opportunity to respond to these challenges.

The Smith Family would also argue that Non Government Organisations (NGOs) can and do play a key role in facilitating deep and long-term school-community relationships which ultimately contribute to improving the wellbeing of children and young people. Such a role is often necessary because as the Australian Council of Educational Research found:

These kinds of collaborations are not easy to build or sustain. Not all school-community partnerships run smoothly. Finding potential partners and resources, knowing who might have the professional expertise to advise and guide program development, gathering information about an area of identified need, knowing how to monitor and evaluate the impact of a collaboration all take time and require different kinds of knowledge and skills (Lonsdale et al, 2012).

The rationale and evidence for the role of NGOs in these newer and deeper 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 NGOs.
- Having NGOs 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.
- NGOs 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 NGOs 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).

The Smith Family would therefore urge that the Senate Committee consider the importance of new and stronger School-Community Partnerships, including with a key facilitating role for NGOs, as an important platform for maximising the effectiveness of Australia's investment in schools, particularly in disadvantaged communities. The model The Smith Family is advocating leverages community assets through the development of school - community - business partnerships to bring community resources into the school. These partnerships are focused on fostering educational and wellbeing outcomes for students through a model that provides enrichment and development opportunities and removes barriers to learning. A school-community partnership also provides value to parents and has the potential to be a hub for the local community to access a variety of services.

The premise underpinning the school-community partnership model is that they promote a range of new collaborations and integrated relationships that enable the school to act as the catalyst for cultural change in the community, bringing students, their families, school staff and the local community together to adopt shared responsibility for improved outcomes. It includes a systems approach which is essential for enhancing educational outcomes. Collective action through school and community partnerships can help to strengthen efforts by governments to address educational disadvantage (Black 2008), and hence maximise the investments made in schooling.

The School-Business-Community Partnership Brokers Program

In the context of the range of sophisticated, deep and diverse partnerships required to support the achievement of educational goals for all young Australians, The Smith Family would also draw the Inquiry's attention to the Commonwealth funded *School-Business-Community Partnership Brokers Program*. The program has been a core component of the Youth Attainment and Transitions National Partnership over the past four years. There is now an emerging range of concrete examples showing how this program has facilitated significant new partnerships focused on improving educational and transition outcomes. Such partnerships, if they are to be significant and sustainable, do not develop quickly, but are an important part of maximising Australia's investment in schools. The program is currently scheduled to conclude at the end of next year and The Smith Family would urge that consideration of the merit of programs such as this be included within the deliberations of this Inquiry.

6. Parent/family engagement in supporting young people's educational outcomes

There is significant evidence of the importance of parent/family engagement in supporting young people's educational outcomes. This includes but is not limited to, the work of Professor John Hattie, the *Making a difference* research, the Productivity Commission, as well as the practical experience of organisations such as The Smith Family in supporting young people's educational outcomes.

Professor Bill Lucas from the University of Winchester has written that 'parent engagement in the educational development of their children, improves attainment more than any other single factor' (Lucas, 2010).

The Productivity Commission (2012) however, found that schools commonly report great difficulties in engaging parents and carers of disadvantaged students to support their children's education (p 21). A quarter of primary school early career teachers and close to a third of secondary school early career teachers found their pre-service training not helpful at all in equipping them to 'work effectively with parents/guardians' (p. 263) . Many schools clearly need additional support if they are to adequately and appropriately engage parents.

As identified above, one of the outcomes of school-community partnerships is that they can strengthen relationships between schools and parents, which in turn can contribute to improved educational outcomes. Non-government organisations have a particularly strong history of working with families to enhance relationships on multiple levels and supporting them to do so. As a recent external evaluation of the *Girls @ the Centre* program run by The Smith Family at Centralian Middle School in Alice Springs shows, the program has very positively impacted on family engagement in the school and, in turn, on the school attendance rates of participants, the majority of whom are of Aboriginal background (Lea and Driscoll, 2012). This program, facilitated by an NGO but operating within the school community, has supported the achievement of improved educational outcomes for participants, and is an example of initiatives that can help to maximise other investments made in the school.

7. Resourcing of schools

In addition to considering how schools function both from a systems and individual perspective, The Smith Family would argue that the way schools are funded is also an important contributor to maximising their effectiveness. The current funding arrangements for schools are complex, inconsistent and ineffective. Historical and piecemeal changes over 40 years have created multiple different funding models for schools and an overall framework that lacks a rational basis. Current funding arrangements cannot address the long tail of educational disadvantage.

The Smith Family believes that a funding model that takes account of both the individual and school level factors known to impact on educational outcomes, such as SES, Indigeneity, remoteness, as well as the concentration of disadvantage, is an important step in maximising the investment made in Australian schools. Such a funding model would provide a clear rationale for funding and greater transparency in the allocation of public funds and provide funding in response to educational need.

The Smith Family has argued that reform of the way schools are resourced is an essential first step in addressing Australia's educational challenge. It also argues that resources must be used to best effect by implementing appropriate interventions, supports and pedagogies that are responsive to student circumstances and needs. More effective cross-sectoral partnerships involving government, community organisations, business, philanthropy and the wider community, through models such as the *School-Community Partnership* model described above are key parts of the educational reform that The Smith Family has called for. Together, school funding reform and educational reform along the lines outlined above, are key planks in maximising the effectiveness of investment in Australian schools.

8. Staffing in schools

In addition to the broader systems changes that are identified above, the way schools are staffed can also contribute to maximising the effectiveness of Australian schools. The recently completed Productivity Commission inquiry into the schools workforce provides some important insights for this Senate Committee.

A brief summary of some of the key issues raised by Productivity Commission which particularly relate to disadvantaged students includes the following:

- Disadvantaged students may need better than average experiences to be able to perform at high levels and overcome their difficulties (p. 255).
- Specialist and support staff play an important complementary role alongside teaching staff (p.256).
- Teachers sometimes have difficulty recognising and responding to the range of factors affecting student outcomes and can also have low expectations of what disadvantaged students can achieve (p 21). The practice of maintaining high aspirations of disadvantaged students is perhaps the most important attribute of all staff who work with them (p. 256).
- Recruiting and retaining suitably qualified teachers, leaders and support staff is more difficult for schools whose students are more likely to be in disadvantaged circumstances (p 257).
- The diverse composition of Australia's student population makes it fundamental that all teachers have a sound awareness of the learning challenges that can confront disadvantaged students.

The Smith Family would argue that models such as School-Community partnerships which bring additional skills, expertise and resources to schools, particularly when facilitated by an NGO, can play a significant role in supporting school staff to be better able to support disadvantaged students. This includes, but is not limited to, supporting enhanced engagement with parents/families, strengthening the focus on high aspirations for students, as well as providing specialist expertise to deal with individual student needs. Such partnerships The Smith Family would argue, can not only improve educational outcomes for children and young people, but can also, over time, contribute to easing the recruitment and retention challenges facing some schools. This is partly because the responsibility for student outcomes and wellbeing is shared by a broader group of individuals and organisations and a range of additional resources are made available to support a common agenda.

The Smith Family acknowledges the efforts of teachers, principals and other school staff across Australia in supporting the educational and wellbeing outcomes of children and young people. It notes however the challenges facing the workforce which need to be addressed if Australia is to maximise its investment in schooling. As the Productivity Commission noted, there is increasing complexity and diversity in the student population and this requires all teachers to be able to meet student needs. The Smith Family's own experience supports the Commission's view that:

A mixed workforce composition which promotes professional collaborations among the various types of staff — teachers, specialists, school leaders, non-teaching support staff and community workers — is vital, so that all staff are working towards the same shared goals for their students. Schools which successfully address disadvantage are also characterised by leaders who foster a highly collegial spirit among all staff (p. 276).

The Smith Family's experience with extended school hubs, a form of community-school partnerships being piloted in Victoria, indicate that such staff do not necessarily have to be employed by the school to be effective, and often there is benefit in them being employed by a 'third party' such as an NGO, so long as there is clarity about shared goals and a way of tracking progress.

9. Enhancing school leadership and expanding school autonomy

There are currently a number of Commonwealth and State Government initiatives which are aimed at enhancing school leadership and expanding school autonomy. The Smith Family's experience in schools across Australia affirms the essential role played by principals and we would argue that it is critical that they be given sufficient time and resources to adequately play the educational leadership role that is required of them. Initiatives such as school-community partnerships where NGOs act as facilitators to bring additional resources to the school are based in part on the premise that educational outcomes will only be enhanced if principals are able to genuinely undertake educational leadership within a collaborative and shared accountability framework. An important corollary of that is that to be successful they must not be unduly burdened by administrative and financial responsibilities.

As the Productivity Commission has noted: 'being able to pursue many of the policy directions that will support disadvantaged students requires some level of school autonomy' (p. 276). This potentially enables schools to more appropriately target the needs of the students in their school community and inject the level of flexibility and innovation that is required to achieve this.

However, the evidence on the merit of school autonomy remains mixed, and therefore monitoring of both the potentially positive and negative implications of this policy is essential. The Productivity Commission has thoughtfully identified both the potential benefits and the potential challenges, particularly for disadvantaged students:

Increased autonomy could, in several respects, work against the interests of disadvantaged students..it could become more difficult for disadvantaged schools to compete for high-quality staff in school-level negotiations. Complementary strategies to steer high-quality teachers and leaders to disadvantaged schools, and appropriate resourcing, are therefore also necessary (p.277).

Importantly for the consideration of this Inquiry, the Productivity Commission has identified the conditions under which school autonomy could be effective:

To be effective, greater autonomy needs to be matched with systems for accountability. In the context of educational disadvantage, this would imply that school leaders need to set goals for their school, measure and assess their progress, and be held accountable for outcomes.... In addition to academic outcomes and attendance rates, other indicators to measure a school's progress towards overcoming educational disadvantage could be used, including whether students have a positive attitude towards school, how strongly students feel connected to their school, and the strength of their parents' involvement (p.277).

The Smith Family strongly supports this view. Greater autonomy must only take place within a systems wide accountability framework so that progress and the educational outcomes being achieved by children and young people can be tracked. To do otherwise would mean that it is highly unlikely that Australia's investment in schools will be maximised.

10. Conclusion

This Senate Inquiry is taking place at a time of significant public discussion regarding education. The data shows that while Australia's school system is among the better performing in the world, *'this overall result is not as strong as it has been in the past and masks a wide degree of variability within our education system. That variability relates to educational outcomes, and to equity – that is, the degree to which people from all backgrounds are able to realise their potential in school* (Nous,

2011). This summary is evidence that Australia is currently not maximising the return on its investment in schooling. In the interests of Australia's social and economic future, it is essential that this be addressed. The Smith Family would argue that this first requires a systemic focus, and that reform of school funding coupled with educational reform are required. As part of the latter, stronger school community partnerships including with an important role for NGOs, should be seen as having an important part to play in maximising Australia's return on investment in education, with the ultimate outcome being improved educational and wellbeing outcomes for all young Australians.

The Smith Family would be happy to expand further on any of the issues raised in this submission.

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