

# Attendance lifts achievement:

Building the evidence base to improve student outcomes

**The Smith Family** Research Report

March 2018



*everyone's family*

## Executive summary

Australian children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are at risk of poor educational outcomes from their first year of school. This risk increases as they move through school, with lower proportions of these young Australians completing Year 12 and moving into employment or further study post-school, compared to their more advantaged peers.

Poor educational outcomes have costly lifelong impacts on young people and the wider community, given the relationship between education and employment, health, social connectedness and reliance on income support.

Although gaps in educational outcomes are evident early in a child's life, research shows young people who start school behind can subsequently meet key educational outcomes. Students who start school developmentally on track can also fall behind over time.

Improving the life outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians relies on providing targeted and timely support to those most at risk of not achieving educationally. Critical to a more efficient allocation of educational resources is a sophisticated understanding of the early flags for poor educational outcomes that go beyond financial disadvantage alone. This includes indicators of educational vulnerability that emerge as young people move through school.

Analysis of a large nationally unique dataset of disadvantaged students participating on The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* scholarship program shows that:

- School attendance and school achievement in English or Maths are closely related.
- Changes in student attendance and achievement are relatively common as students move through school.



- Attendance and achievement are early indicators of students who are likely to have poor longer-term outcomes, as they help predict school completion and engagement post-school in work or further study.
- Targeted and timely support to improve students' low school attendance and below satisfactory achievement in English and Maths as they move through school is essential.
- Improvements in attendance and achievement are possible and increase the likelihood of students completing school and being in work or study post-school.

There is a significant opportunity to improve the educational performance of Australian school students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Key to improving their educational outcomes are:

- Tracking students' individual progress.

- Using educational data to identify, as early as possible, which students need additional support.
- Targeting support to meet the educational challenges and circumstances of individual students.

A Unique Student Identifier (USI) for all Australian students is core to providing nuanced and timely support to students and for understanding the impact of this support on their educational outcomes. A USI is particularly important for disadvantaged students, many of whom experience high levels of mobility.

Highly disadvantaged students can achieve educationally and be involved in work or study post-school. Achieving these outcomes sets young people up for positive long-term life outcomes, including economic and social participation.

This research has policy and programmatic relevance well beyond the *Learning for Life* program and can contribute to ongoing national efforts focussed on improving the educational outcomes of young Australians, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Introduction

Australian children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are at risk of poor educational outcomes from their first year of school. This risk increases as students move through school as highlighted by the data below:

- A third of students (32.6 percent) from Australia's most disadvantaged areas are developmentally vulnerable in one or more key areas<sup>1</sup> in their first year of school. This compares to 15.5 percent of children from the least disadvantaged areas (Australian Government 2016).
- Around three in five Year 5 students (59.6 percent) whose parents did not complete Year 12 achieve above the national minimum reading standard on NAPLAN,<sup>2</sup> compared to 94.0 percent of students who have a parent with a university degree. There is a similar gap in other areas of performance, for example, in Year 9 numeracy (ACARA 2017).
- Six out of 10 students from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds complete Year 12 or equivalent, compared to around nine in 10 of those from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds (Lamb et al. 2015).

Poor educational outcomes affect young people's post-school opportunities and life outcomes, including their employment prospects, health and social connectedness. This results in significant costs to the young people themselves and to the wider Australian community. It has been conservatively estimated for example, that the lifetime costs to Governments and the community for each young person who does not complete Year 12 or equivalent by age 19 is close to one million dollars (Lamb & Huo 2017).

Although gaps in educational outcomes are evident early in a child's life, research shows it is possible for them to subsequently meet important educational outcomes. It is

also possible for students who start school developmentally on track, to fall behind over time. Among Australian students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds for example, one third who were behind on key educational milestones at school entry, met the reading and numeracy benchmarks by the time they were in Year 7. A further one third of students who were on track at school entry, did not meet these early high school benchmarks (Lamb et al. 2015).

Improving the educational outcomes of young Australians relies on providing targeted and timely support to those at risk of not achieving key milestones. But what are the early flags or indicators that identify students at educational risk who would benefit from additional support? Do these indicators vary over time as students move through high school? Can these indicators contribute to providing more nuanced and effective educational support to those who need it? The answers to these questions can both help to improve individual student outcomes and inform the more efficient allocation of educational resources, by directing support to students who need it.

## This publication

This publication presents analyses of data collected from a large number of disadvantaged students, all of whom are being supported through The Smith Family's long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*. Analysis of demographic, administrative, program participation and educational outcomes data over time of students on this program, is providing new insights on better targeting of educational support for highly disadvantaged young people. These insights are informing the ongoing refinement of the *Learning for Life* program. However, the value of this research goes well beyond this specific program to include broader educational policy and programmatic efforts aimed at improving Australia's educational performance.

## The *Learning for Life* program

The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* scholarship program aims to support children from financially disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve educationally. The key underpinnings of the program are:

- An **early intervention** and **long-term** approach – students can begin on the program in their first year of school and continue through primary and high school to the completion of tertiary education.
- Supporting **parents to be engaged** in their child's learning – research shows the importance of parental engagement and the home learning environment for educational outcomes, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Fox & Olsen 2014).
- **High expectations** for all students – regardless of their family background.

<sup>1</sup> These areas are: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; communication skills and general knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)

- **Reciprocity** and **accountability** – families enter into a Partnership Agreement with The Smith Family which articulates a shared commitment to the student's participation in education.
- A **'beyond school'** approach – the program complements, but is in addition to, what happens at school, reflecting the important non-school factors which influence educational outcomes (Hattie 2009).
- **Multiple partnerships** – with families, schools, communities, business, governments, sponsors and philanthropy, recognising that improving educational outcomes is a shared responsibility requiring diverse resources and collective effort.
- Strong **outcomes** focus – educational outcomes for each student on the program are tracked over time.

### Program criteria

The key criteria for recruiting families onto the program are:

- They are **low income**, as evidenced by having a Government Health Care Card or being on a pension.
- Their child is attending a **partner school** in one of more than 90 disadvantaged communities across Australia in which The Smith Family works.<sup>3</sup>
- They agree to enter into a **Family Partnership Agreement** which acknowledges a shared commitment to the student's participation in education.

### Program components

The *Learning for Life* program has three integrated components that provide financial, relational and programmatic support:

- A modest **biannual payment** to families – to help them cover education-related expenses such as books, uniforms, excursions and information technology.

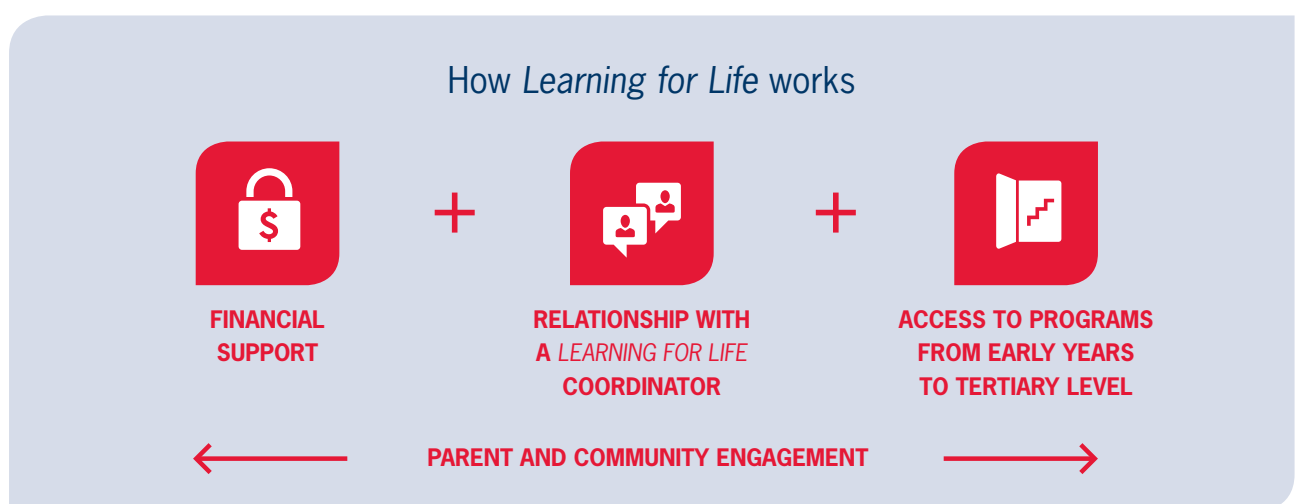
- A Smith Family **Program Coordinator** – who works in partnership with the family to help them overcome any barriers to their child achieving educationally, connects them to a range of learning opportunities and supports them in creating positive home-school learning environments.
- Access to a **range of short programs** – that target different stages of a young person's life and help them develop the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours needed for long-term educational achievement. These programs include literacy and numeracy programs, after-school learning clubs, mentoring and career activities, as well as digital and financial literacy skills programs that support their parents/carers.<sup>4</sup>

### Students on the program

The *Learning for Life* program supports over 38,000 financially disadvantaged children and young people across Australia each year. One in five (20 percent) of these young people are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

As a group, the characteristics and circumstances of students on the program include:

- **Disability:** Two in five students have a health or disability issue and four in five students live in a family where at least one person has a health or disability issue.
- **Parental employment:** Three in four students live in a household in which the primary carer is not in paid employment.
- **Parental education:** Over half (56 percent) live in a family in which the primary carer has not attained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification.
- **Family structure:** Over half of students (55 percent) live in single parent families and a further one in 20 live with grandparent/s or in a range of other guardianship arrangements.



<sup>3</sup> While students are recruited from partner schools, they can continue on the program even if they move to a non-partner school or community. This ensures that long-term support is provided even when students are mobile.

<sup>4</sup> In this publication, the term 'parent' includes a range of other carers, such as grandparents, kinship carers and foster parents who are the primary carer for students on the *Learning for Life* program.

- **Internet:** Three in 10 students live in a home where there is no computer and/or a device connected to the internet.
- **Mobility:** One in five students in Years 5 to 12 has attended four or more schools and one in twenty has been at six or more schools.

These characteristics and circumstances highlight that the *Learning for Life* program is targeting young people who, without support, are likely to struggle to achieve educationally.

On average, students on *Learning for Life* who are in secondary school or tertiary education have been on the program for six years or more. This is a strength of the program as it highlights its capacity to keep families engaged over the longer-term and to provide support over multiple years to highly disadvantaged students.

### Learning for Life student outcomes data

Each student on the *Learning for Life* program has a **unique student identifier** (USI) (eg a 7 digit number) which enables their individual progress to be tracked over time. Key educational data, such as achievement in English and Maths and school attendance, are collected on each *Learning for Life* student, from their end-of-year school reports. Data on whether students complete school and their engagement in work and/or study post-school are also collected.

Many students will move home and change schools at some point, and some will experience multiple moves while they are on the program. The USI, data management systems and The Smith Family Program Coordinators allow students' progress to be consistently monitored regardless of this mobility.

#### Achievement and attendance

In Australian schools, teacher assessments of **achievement** against national curriculum standards for English and Maths are reported on using a scale from A to E, where:

- A = Excellent achievement
- B = Good achievement

- C = Satisfactory achievement
- D = Partial achievement
- E = Minimal achievement

**School attendance** rates are calculated based on the number of days (or part days) students attend, as a proportion of the total number of days they are expected to attend school. These rates are reported as percentages.

### Relationship between English achievement and attendance

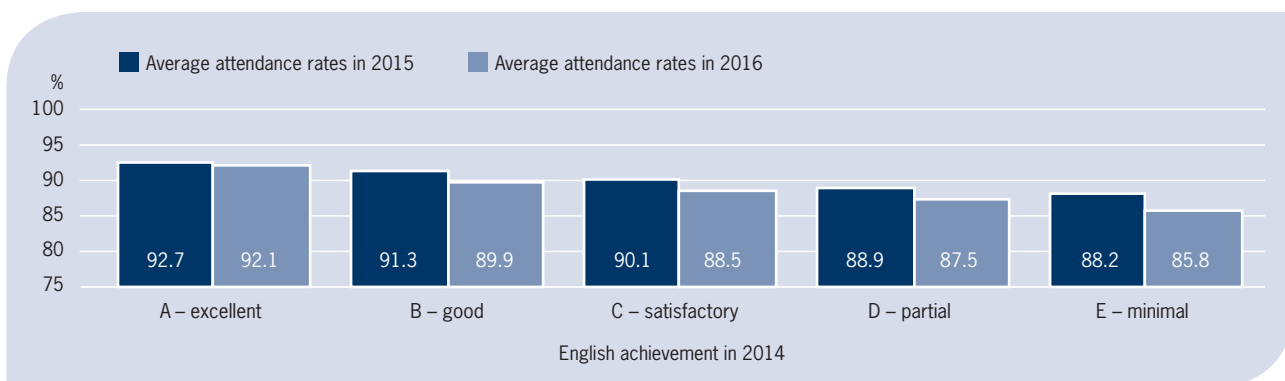
Consistent with national data,<sup>5</sup> the average attendance rates of *Learning for Life* students decline once they enter high school, from 90.7 percent in Year 6 to 84.3 percent by Year 10.<sup>6</sup> The extent of the decline, however, varies between students in the same year of school. Some *Learning for Life* students for example, maintain high attendance rates right through high school. Being able to predict which students are at greater risk of declining attendance can identify who needs additional support and help prevent this decline.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between *Learning for Life* students' English achievement grades in 2014 and their subsequent attendance rates in 2015 and 2016. On average, lower English achievement grades in 2014 are a predictor of lower attendance in subsequent years.

The decline in attendance was greatest for those students with minimal (grade E) English achievement (that is from 88.2 percent in 2015 to 85.8 percent in 2016). This equates to these students attending school, on average, five days fewer in 2016 compared with 2015.

In contrast, students with excellent English achievement in 2014 had more stable school attendance from one year to the next (92.7 percent to 92.1 percent). The relationship between attendance and achievement reinforces the importance of efforts focussed on improving student school attendance.

**Figure 1: Attendance rates 2015 and 2016 by English achievement in 2014**



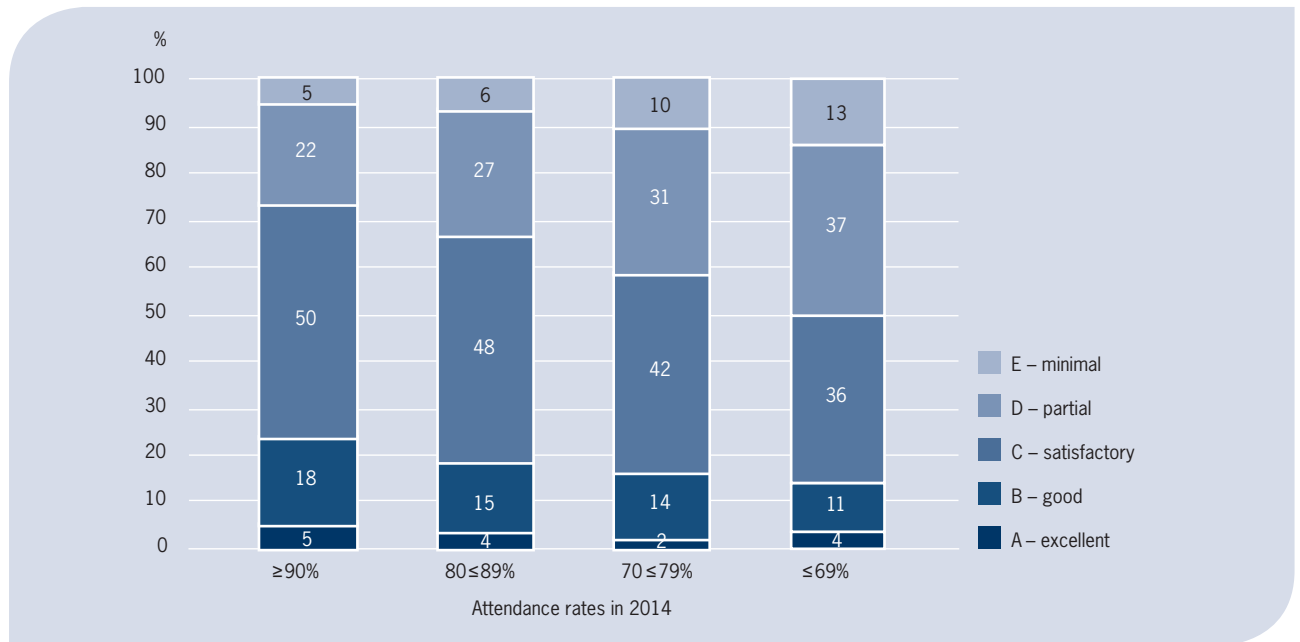
5 <http://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/student-attendance#View2>

6 Average attendance rates for *Learning for Life* students in 2016.

Figure 2 shows that conversely, attendance predicts future achievement. Students with higher attendance rates in 2014 were more likely to receive satisfactory or above English

grades in 2016, while students with lower attendance rates in 2014, on average had lower achievement grades in 2016.

**Figure 2: English achievement in 2016 by attendance rates in 2014<sup>7</sup>**



The relationships between Maths achievement and attendance show similar results. However, as Maths and English achievement grades are highly correlated<sup>8</sup> and English is the only subject that is currently compulsory to the end of high school, only the results for English achievement are presented.

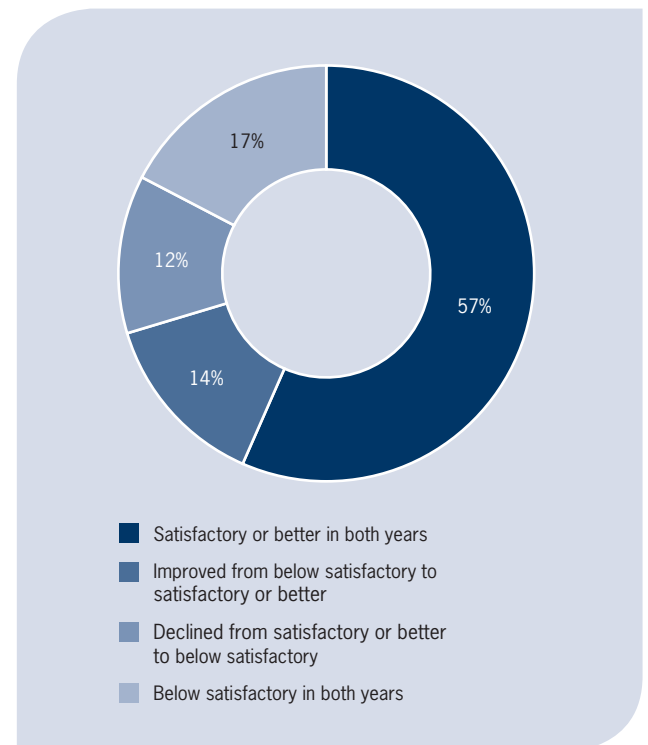
### Changes in English achievement over time

Figure 3 shows that the majority (57 percent) of *Learning for Life* students had satisfactory or better English achievement in both 2014 and 2016. It also shows that for a reasonable proportion of students, achievement in English varies over time. Between 2014 and 2016, one in four (26 percent) students experienced considerable movement in their English achievement grades. Fourteen percent improved from below satisfactory to satisfactory or better, while 12 percent declined from satisfactory or better to below satisfactory.

The fact that some students improved provides evidence that low achievement in English is recoverable. It offers some optimism that improvements in achievement are possible, including as students move through high school.

Providing timely support to students to arrest declines in achievement is critical if they are to meet key educational outcomes. The indication that performance can decline from satisfactory to below satisfactory also highlights that educational challenges can emerge at different points in time as students move through school. This reinforces the need for ongoing monitoring of the achievement of all students.

**Figure 3: Changes in English achievement 2014 to 2016**



<sup>7</sup> Throughout this publication, numbers in some graphs may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

<sup>8</sup> The majority of students (above 60%) achieve similar grades in English and Maths.

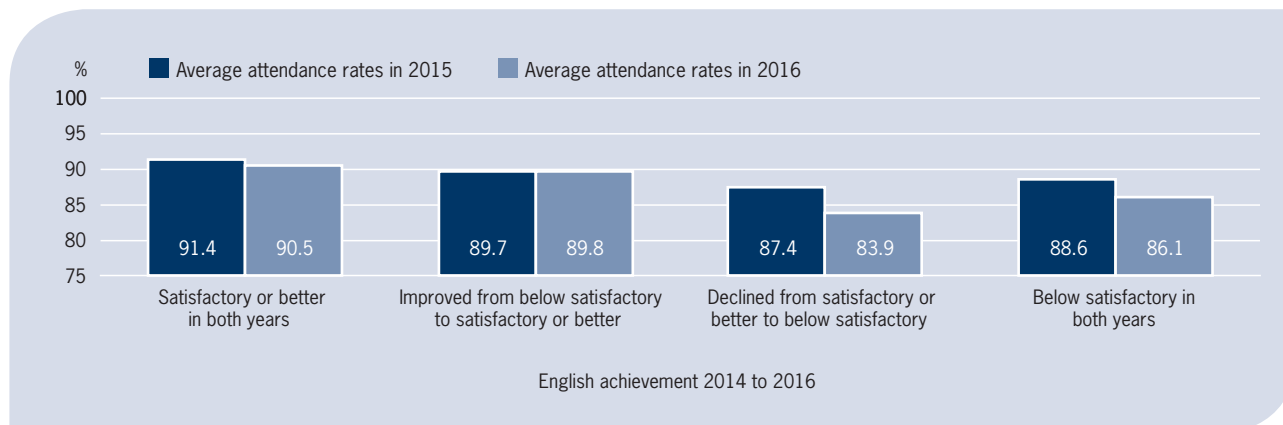
Figure 4 reinforces the relationship between achievement and attendance over time. For the 57 percent of students whose English grade remained satisfactory or better in 2014 and 2016, average attendance rates were above 90 percent in 2015 and 2016. In contrast, the 12 percent of students whose English achievement declined from satisfactory or better to below satisfactory and the 17 percent whose achievement was consistently below satisfactory, had below average and declining attendance rates.

Students with declining English grades experienced the largest decline in attendance between 2015 and 2016 (from

87.4 percent to 83.9 percent). This equates to seven fewer days of school being attended by these students in 2016 relative to 2015.

Importantly, Figure 4 also highlights the benefit to attendance if achievement improves over time. On average, attendance did not decline from one year to the next for the 14 percent of students whose English grade improved from below satisfactory in 2014 to satisfactory or better by 2016.

**Figure 4: Attendance rates in 2015 and 2016 by changes in English achievement 2014 to 2016**



## Implications

The above analyses do not necessarily mean that low achievement **causes** low attendance or vice versa. However, because achievement and attendance move together they can both be used as **indicators** of risk for each other and, as will be shown later in this publication, for other related school outcomes.

In particular, because attendance tends to be high in the primary school years for most students, low or declining achievement can be used as an **early or lead indicator** of risk for future low attendance. By identifying students at risk as early as possible, additional timely support can be provided to potentially arrest declines in both attendance and achievement.



## School completion

Completion of Year 12 or equivalent has been identified as essential if young people are to have the skills needed to thrive in the 21st century (Lamb & Huo 2017). Completing school is positively associated with employment, income, health, social participation and a reduced likelihood of being reliant on income support.

The Smith Family's Advancement Rate is a longitudinal measure of school completion – it tracks the progress of

individual Year 10 students on the *Learning for Life* program who complete Year 12 or equivalent while on scholarship.

Table 1 shows the Advancement Rate and number of *Learning for Life* students who have completed Year 12, between 2012 and 2016. The rate has gradually increased from six out of 10 students (59.6 percent) in 2012 to seven out of 10 students (68.2 percent) for the last two years. Over this period, 8,531 highly disadvantaged students have been supported by the *Learning for Life* program to complete Year 12 or equivalent.

**Table 1: Advancement Rates of *Learning for Life* students**

|   | 2010-12 | 2011-13 | 2012-14 | 2013-15 | 2014-16 |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Advanced to Year 12 or equivalent (% of Year 10 cohort) | 59.6    | 62.5    | 63.2    | 68.2    | 68.2    |
| Advanced to Year 12 or equivalent (Number of students)  | 1,455   | 1,662   | 1,645   | 1,778   | 1,991   |

## Identifying students at risk of leaving school early

The very large lifetime costs to young people, Governments and the community of the non-completion of Year 12 has already been noted. Being able to identify which students are at risk of leaving school early and providing them with additional support to complete Year 12, will both contribute to their achieving better long-term life outcomes and positively impact on the Australian community.

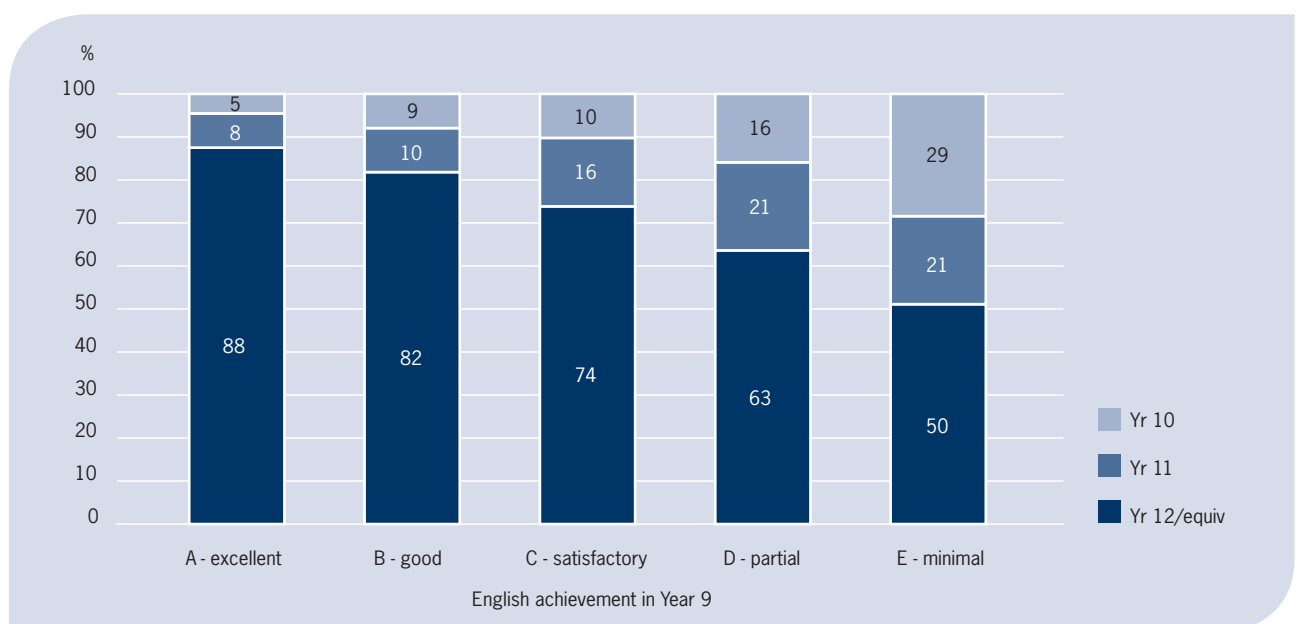
A young person's decision to leave school early tends to involve a process of disengagement that can occur over many months, rather than a single point-in-time decision. The long-term nature of the *Learning for Life* program and the regular collection of data from students on the program, supports the identification of those most at risk of not completing school. This in turn provides an opportunity to intervene more intensively with those students to support them to complete Year 12.

## Relationship between Year 9 English achievement and school completion

Figure 5 shows the relationship between achievement in English in Year 9 and school completion for *Learning for Life* students. Students who achieved a satisfactory or better grade (A, B or C) in English in Year 9, were much more likely to complete Year 12 than those whose achievement was below satisfactory (D or E). Close to nine in 10 (88 percent) Year 10 *Learning for Life* students who achieved an A (excellent) subsequently completed Year 12. Three in four (74 percent) students who achieved a C completed Year 12, while only half (50 percent) of those who achieved an E did so.

The strong relationship between achievement and school completion highlights the need for students with low or declining achievement grades to receive targeted support to help them meet key learning standards and stay engaged in school.

**Figure 5: Highest year level completed 2014-2016 by English achievement in Year 9**





### Relationship between Year 7 attendance and school completion

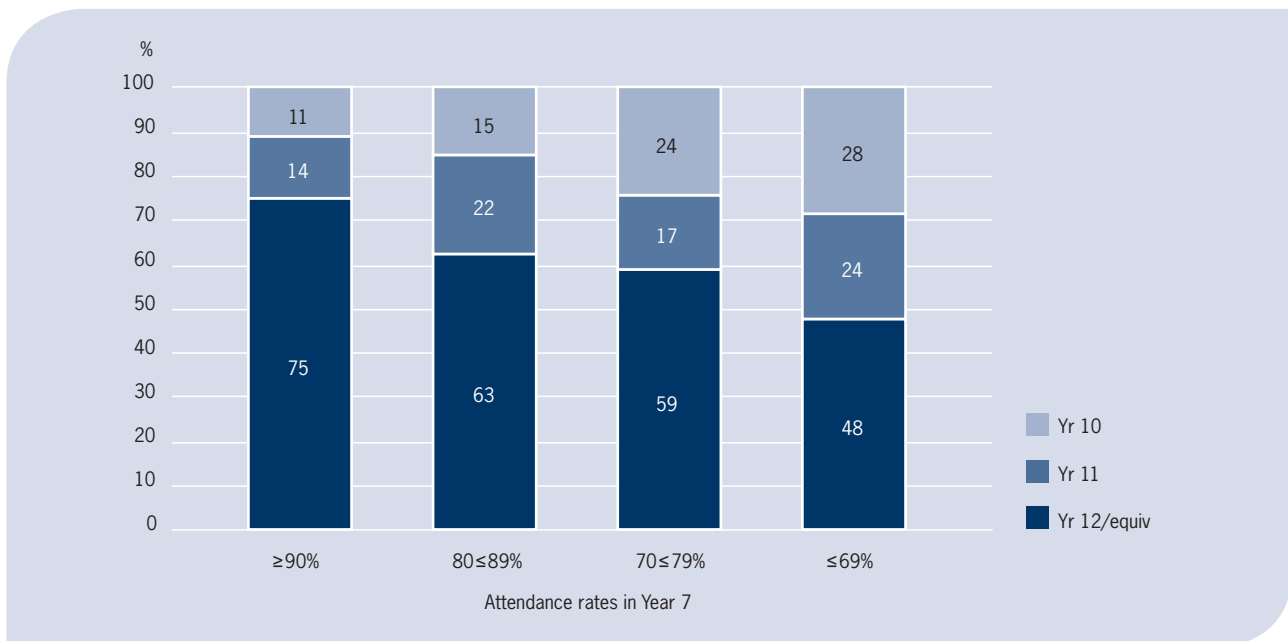
The above analyses have shown the relationship between school attendance and achievement, and school achievement and school completion. Similarly, there is a relationship between school attendance and school completion.

Figure 6 shows that school attendance, including in the early years of high school, can help predict the likelihood of school completion. Year 10 *Learning for Life* students with attendance rates of 90 percent or above when they were in Year 7, were much more likely to complete Year 12 or

equivalent, than students who had poorer attendance in Year 7.

Less than half (48 percent) of Year 10 *Learning for Life* students who had very low attendance (69 percent or below) in Year 7 completed Year 12, compared with three in four students (75 percent) of those whose attendance was 90 percent or above. The relationship between attendance and school completion becomes stronger as students move through high school, but early identification of students at risk is important to ensure that additional support is provided as soon as possible.

**Figure 6: Highest year level completed 2014-2016 by attendance rates in Year 7**





## What happens to school completion if low school attendance improves?

Analysis of available Year 9 attendance data for students who had very low Year 7 attendance (69 percent or below), shows that just under half (44.4 percent) of these students improved their attendance by Year 9. This indicates that low attendance (as with low achievement) is recoverable and that early identification provides a real opportunity for targeted additional support to bring students back on track.

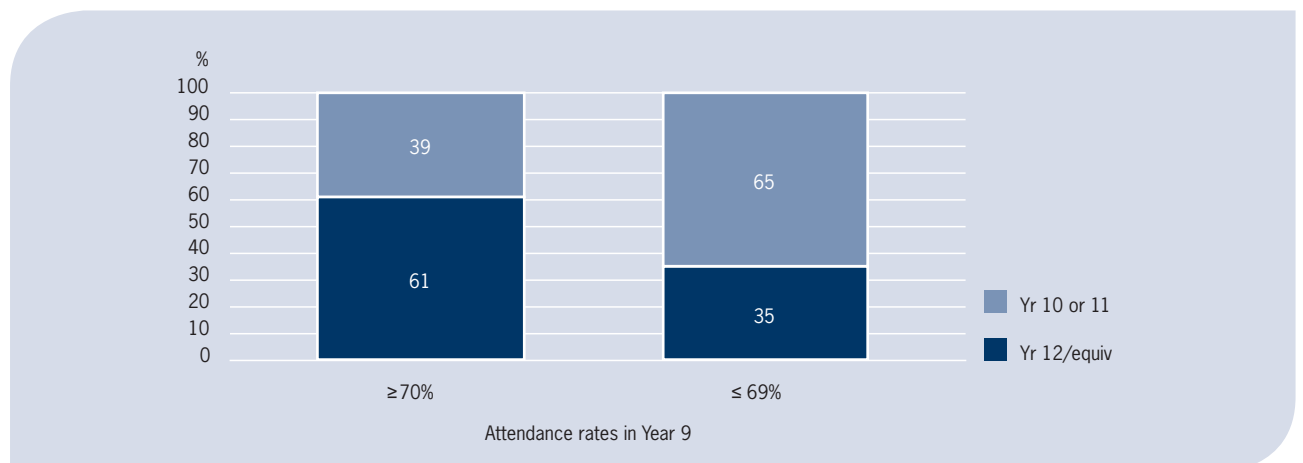
Figure 7 shows the longer-term benefit of improvement in attendance. Students with very low attendance rates in Year 7 who improved their attendance by Year 9, were much more likely to complete Year 12, compared to those whose attendance remained very low. Six in ten students (61 percent) who improved their attendance between Year 7 and Year 9 completed Year 12, compared to only 35 percent whose attendance remained very low across Years 7 and 9.

This analysis confirms that low attendance is an early indicator of students who are at risk of early school leaving. Early intervention to improve the attendance rates of students who are missing significant amounts of school, can have a very positive impact on the likelihood of them remaining in school and completing Year 12.

The relationship between attendance and Year 12 completion may appear even earlier than Year 7. However, for *Learning for Life* students who completed Year 12 in 2016, the earliest available attendance data The Smith Family has is from when they were in Year 7. In the future, as data continues to be collected for students on the program over a longer period, it will be possible to explore the potential relationship between attendance in primary school and school completion. The earlier these indicators of likely risk of non-completion of school emerge, the sooner additional support can be provided and the greater the likelihood of reducing early school leaving.



**Figure 7: Highest year level completed 2014-2016 by attendance in Year 9 for students with very low attendance in Year 7<sup>9</sup>**



<sup>9</sup> 69 percent or below.

## Post-school engagement in work or study

The Smith Family conducts a biennial Engagement survey with young people who exit the *Learning for Life* program when they are in Years 10, 11 or 12. The survey's focus is former scholarship participants' engagement in employment, education and training. The most recent survey was conducted in March/April 2017 with 1,040 young people who exited the program approximately 12 months previously.

### Engagement Rate

The Engagement Rate measures the proportion of former scholarship students who are:

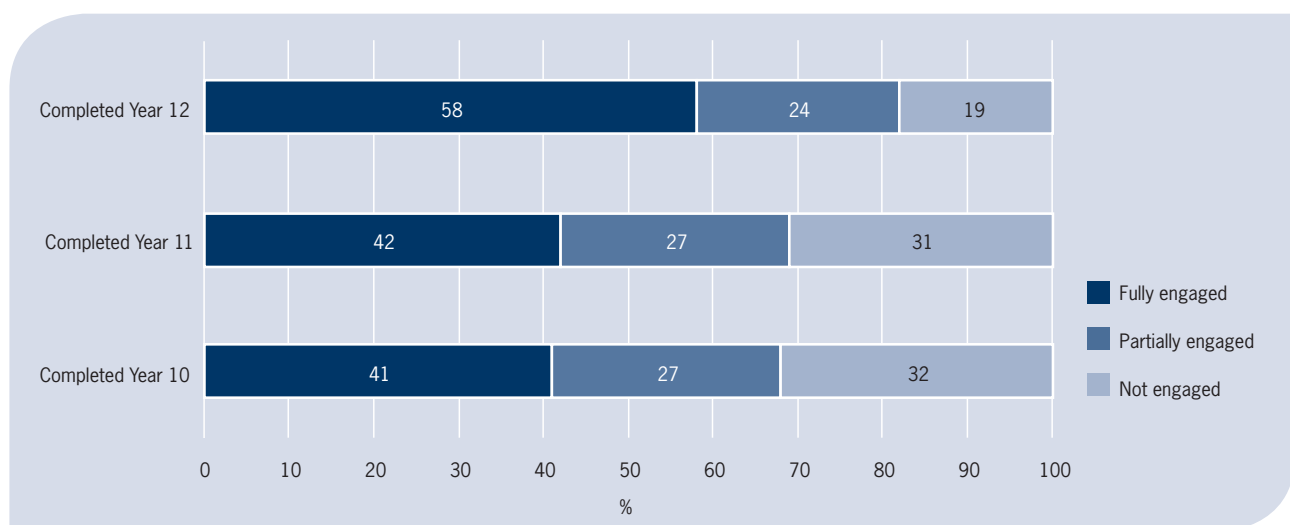
- Fully engaged in paid work and/or study (35 hours or more per week).
- Partially engaged in paid work and/or study (less than 35 hours per week).

- Not engaged in paid work and/or study.

In 2017, four in five (79 percent) former *Learning for Life* students were either fully (57 percent) or partially (22 percent) engaged in paid work and/or study.

As shown in Figure 8, former *Learning for Life* students who completed Year 12 are much more likely to be engaged in paid work or further study than early school leavers. Eighty two percent of former *Learning for Life* students who completed Year 12 were engaged in work and/or study, compared to only 68 percent of those who only completed Year 10. This is consistent with other national research regarding the importance of school completion for post-school outcomes (Lamb et al. 2015) and highlights the value of Year 12 completion.

**Figure 8: Post-school engagement rates in work and/or study by highest year level completed, 2017**



## Relationship between achievement, attendance and post-school engagement

Attendance and achievement during high school predicts Year 12 completion and also predicts post-school outcomes. Figure 9 shows that *Learning for Life* students with high achievement grades are more likely to be fully engaged in paid work and/or

study after they leave the program. Of former students who had above satisfactory English achievement in 2014, 92 percent were engaged in work and/or study post-school in 2017 (68 percent are fully engaged and 24 percent partially engaged). This compares to 74 percent of students who had below satisfactory achievement (43 percent fully engaged and 31 percent partially engaged).

**Figure 9: Post-school engagement rates in 2017 by 2014 English achievement**

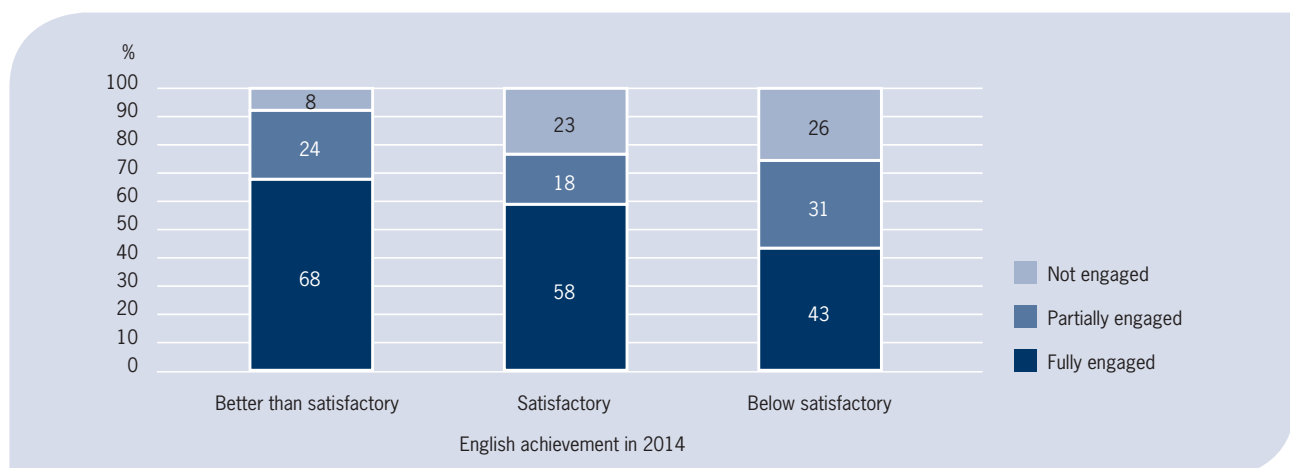


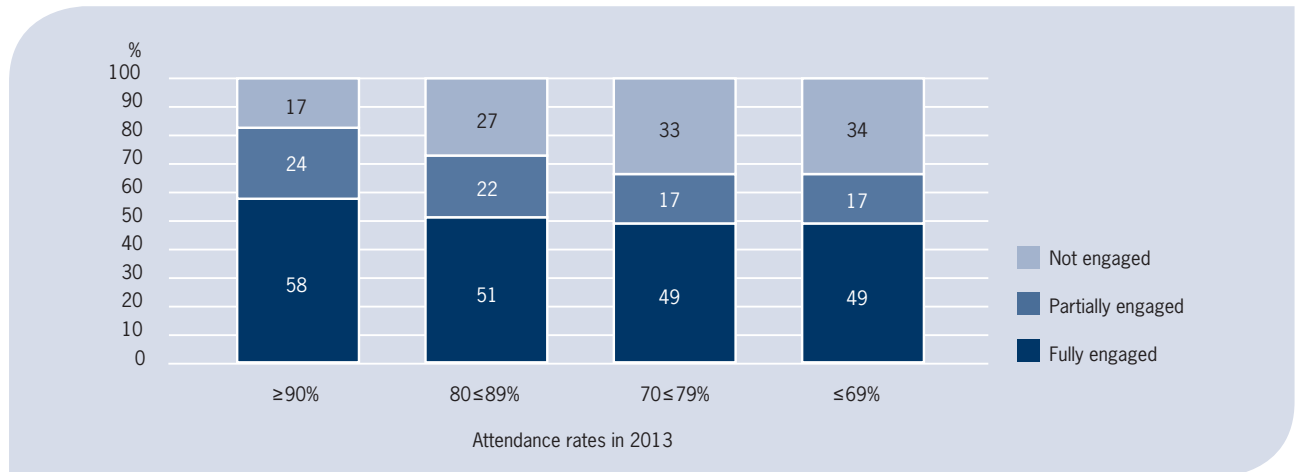
Figure 10 also shows a positive relationship between post-school engagement in work and/or study and school attendance rates. Eight in 10 (82 percent) students who had high attendance rates (above 90 percent) in 2013, were engaged in work and/or further study in 2017 (58 percent were fully engaged and 24 percent partially engaged). Only 17 percent of students with high attendance rates in 2013 were not engaged in 2017.

This compares to a third of students whose attendance in 2013 was below 80 percent who were not engaged in work

or further study post-school. The risk of not being in work or study post-school is therefore twice as high for students with low attendance rates during high school, compared to those with high attendance rates.

A focus on ensuring strong school attendance across all years of school can therefore contribute to both school completion and post-school engagement in work or study.

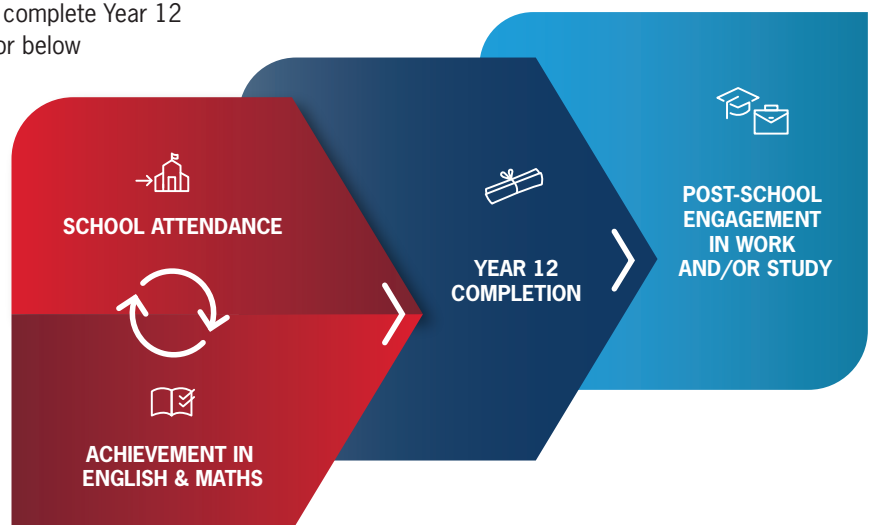
**Figure 10: Post-school engagement rates in 2017 by 2013 attendance rates**



## Summary of findings

Detailed analysis of longitudinal data collected from students participating on the *Learning for Life* program shows:

- There are strong relationships between school attendance, school achievement, school completion and post-school engagement in work and/or study.
  - On average, low achievement grades are associated with low and decreasing attendance in subsequent years. Similarly, lower attendance rates are associated with lower achievement grades in later years.
  - Students with high attendance or high achievement in early high school are more likely to complete Year 12 than students with low attendance or below satisfactory achievement.
  - Students with high attendance rates or high achievement grades in early to mid high school are more likely to be engaged in work and/or study after leaving school, than students with low attendance or below satisfactory achievement.
- Changes in school attendance and achievement are relatively common and improvements, including for those who are performing at or below a satisfactory level, are possible.
- Regular monitoring of the achievement and attendance of all students as they move through school is critical, so that timely and targeted support is provided to students who need it. This includes those students who experience challenges over multiple years, as well as students whose achievement and attendance decline as they move through high school.





## Some policy and practice implications

This research reinforces a previous study conducted in Western Australia (Hancock et al. 2013) that showed a strong association between school attendance and achievement for students across all socioeconomic backgrounds. It goes further, however, to show the relationships between attendance, achievement and in turn school completion and post-school engagement in work or study, for highly vulnerable students. It demonstrates these relationships through analysis of data on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, participating in the *Learning for Life* program.

While these relationships make intuitive sense, confirming them through analysis of longitudinal data from a large number of students is foundational for efforts aimed at improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians. It helps identify the early indicators which can distinguish students needing additional support to achieve educationally.

The research also highlights that change – and importantly improvements – in the key outcomes of achievement and attendance are possible. Given the importance of positive educational outcomes for life-time economic and social participation and that as a group, Australian students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have particularly poor educational and post-school outcomes, this research has important national implications for policy and practice.

### Achievement and attendance as indicators of risk

This report demonstrates that attendance and achievement are closely related. Attendance and achievement are also indicators of Year 12 completion and post-school outcomes. This research confirms the importance of strategies focussed on improving student attendance, right across primary and secondary schooling.

Achievement data can also be used as a lead or early indicator for educational risk. This may be particularly useful in the primary years, given that attendance is typically high for most primary school students, and hence may not identify those students at risk of poor longer-term outcomes.

Among financially disadvantaged students, using educational outcomes such as attendance and achievement on an ongoing basis, provides a more sophisticated understanding of their current and changing educational support needs. An emphasis on demographic characteristics alone can lead to some students not being identified for the additional support they need, while others are targeted for additional support which they do not require.

Identifying students at risk of poor educational and post-school outcomes by their actual school engagement and performance is likely to lead to more efficient allocation of resources and better student outcomes.

### Support for students at risk

Students with low attendance and/or low achievement should be targeted for additional support as early as possible to enhance their engagement in learning. In the secondary years of schooling, it is important to continue to target for additional support students with low achievement and/or low attendance, as improvement in educational outcomes for these students is achievable. There are enormous costs to the Australian community when young people fail to attain key educational outcomes, such as Year 12 completion.

### High attenders and achievers

It is also important to continue to monitor high attenders and/or achievers over time, given that a proportion will experience declining academic performance as they move through school. In addition, for consistently high attenders and/or achievers from disadvantaged backgrounds, the focus of extra-curricular support does not need to be on engagement in learning (as it may need to be with low attenders or achievers). Rather it should be to ensure access to a wide range of learning experiences, expansion and strengthening of networks and cultural capital and enhancing students' sense of possibilities. This support can help high achieving students to make the most of their capabilities and contribute to strong post-school outcomes.

### Supporting students at risk of early school leaving

This research has identified the opportunity to pilot a new initiative that focuses on financially disadvantaged young people in Years 9 to 11 who are at risk of leaving school early. The Smith Family's **Early School Leavers** initiative is being trialed in a small number of communities in New South Wales and Victoria in 2018. The pilot uses The Smith Family's long-term relationship with students and their families and educational data (such as attendance and achievement) collected on these students through their participation in the *Learning for Life* program, to identify those at risk of early school leaving.

The initiative is providing more intensive support to these young people to help them stay at school. This includes career coaching to help them set goals for the future and put in place plans to achieve these goals, additional skills development opportunities including with employers, vocational cadetships and structured referrals to community supports and services.

The aim of the initiative is to support students to complete Year 12, or where this is not achievable, to help them put in place a structured post-school pathway, which involves employment and/or further study. The pilot is being evaluated and the outcomes of these students will be assessed as part of the *Learning for Life* program, including whether or not they complete Year 12 and their post-school engagement in work and/or study.

## Unique Student Identifier

The data analyses reported in this publication were only possible because each *Learning for Life* student has a unique student identifier (USI) which enables the linking of multiple student data over time. This research reinforces the value of a national USI for **all** Australian students, as it is core to understanding the impact of schooling over time on student outcomes and to providing nuanced and timely support to diverse groups of students.

The USI is particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, many of whom experience high levels of mobility.

As the Productivity Commission (2016) has noted, *“The introduction of a nationally consistent system of unique student identifiers would offer significant benefits... (it) would enable tracking of individual student outcomes over time, across jurisdictions and between government and non-government schools. Having access to students’ historical academic and administrative records would make it easier and more efficient for schools and teachers to prepare programs and strategies that support students’ individual needs. For researchers, USI would provide a straightforward way of accessing longitudinal data on students’ outcomes and other personal information (such as disability status), which can form an essential ‘backbone’ of data for conducting evaluations of the impact of specific programs and interventions.”*

Australian governments endorsed the establishment of a USI in 2009, but to date there has been limited progress towards this goal. The analysis presented here highlights the power and value of a USI and longitudinal data for enhancing Australia’s educational progress.

## Conclusion

There is a significant opportunity to improve the educational performance of Australian school students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who on average achieve poorer outcomes than their more advantaged peers. Key to improving educational outcomes is tracking students’ individual progress and using educational data and evidence to identify, as early as possible, which students need additional support to achieve.

Analysis of data from students on the *Learning for Life* program confirms that highly disadvantaged students can achieve educationally and be involved in work and/or study post-school. It also identifies that further improvement in the outcomes achieved by students on the program is possible, through additional targeted support informed by this analysis and the learnings derived from ongoing program implementation.

The findings presented in this publication have policy and programmatic relevance well beyond the *Learning for Life* program and can contribute to ongoing national efforts focussed on improving the educational outcomes of young Australians, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.





Photo: Kate Geraghty, Fairfax Media

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“The Smith Family scholarship gave me the belief that people were willing to invest in me, because they thought that I could finish my education and I could go further.”

Rhiannon, *Learning for Life* student

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