



Declan, student2student participant

Real People, Real Stories

Thank you for changing lives.

Spring 2022



Creating better futures together



everyone's family

Thank you for doing whatever it takes for students

Thanks to you, the extraordinary efforts to build a better future for our children reached new heights this year, with donors showing amazing compassion.

In March, devastating floods hit New South Wales and Queensland and at least 3,179 of our students let us know they were directly affected. Thanks to our generous donors, we provided some additional financial assistance, so students can replace school essentials lost or damaged in the floods. For this incredible response, I can't thank you enough. You have helped provide exactly what students need to get back to learning, so they don't have to face added strain, on top of other challenges.

If there is a health crisis or natural disaster that affects our community, The Smith Family is ready to do all it takes to be here for our students. But we are also prepared to reinvent our organisation as the needs of our young people and families change.

It's why recently we've recognised the critical importance of digitising our learning and mentoring programs. On the next page, you can read about the innovations underway in program digitisation. We believe with this approach we can help more young Australians in need. None of this is possible without your care and support.

I hope you'll be moved by the story of Declan in this edition, a boy who loves to help others, but almost gave up on himself. Declan's learning outlook has changed dramatically thanks to supporters like you. His outstanding progress – and the delight this brings him – is something

I want for all the young people we support.

As always, I thank you for helping to build a better future for all children. Your donations help build a stronger, more educated society – one where we can live and thrive in harmony.

Warmest wishes,



Doug Taylor
Chief Executive Officer



The Smith Family's Program Digitisation Roadmap

The Smith Family has embarked on a three-year program digitisation initiative. This initiative will help students thrive in a digital world.

We are planning to provide access to more of our programs and services online. This will improve skills and access to technology to reduce the digital divide for young Australians in need.

Students will be able to choose fit-for-purpose programs that align with their educational needs. We will also deliver improved services to enhance our partnerships with schools and teachers.

Putting the student at the centre of our work and our solutions, we are future proofing the organisation to remain sustainable and effective.

This initiative is vital to our organisational effectiveness. It is essential for our students to be digitally included so they can fully engage in learning and be equipped for the world of work.



Student2student goes digital

Student2student is one of The Smith Family's programs that has already undergone a digital transformation. Thanks to you, we are able to match students who need to improve their reading with trained peer buddies.

When the program began, the student and their buddy received the same books by post and read them together over the phone at set times. However, in the last two years, your support has enabled us to make great innovations in the digital space.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, we experienced delays with post and couldn't have staff and volunteers in offices to supply and deliver the books. In response, The Smith Family worked with existing online library provider Chatty Kids to upgrade and create a new website to deliver *student2student* online.

Now, 80% of the program's participants use Chatty Kids to read together, using a laptop or other device. This allows instant access to resources, so when students are ready to start a new book or move up a level, they can do that straight away.

Having *student2student* online is also helping bridge the digital literacy gap with families given training and practice on using technology.

At Learning Club, Jasmine gets to set her own pace, with powerful results

Money has always been tight at home for twins, Jasmine and Natalie, and their mum. Twins bring double the fun, but also twice the cost for school essentials. Jasmine and her sister often needed learning support at the same time and there wasn't always enough to go around. Juggling their education needs could get very overwhelming.

At school, Jasmine was very proud to study advanced mathematics. But the bright, chatty student struggled to keep up in class. Jasmine was falling further behind. Her confidence was being crushed and her passion for learning dwindled.

**“I was so unmotivated in the classroom. It felt so unfair.”
– Jasmine, Learning Club participant**



Jasmine, Learning Club participant

“I was so unmotivated in the classroom,” she says. “It felt so unfair.”

Fortunately, at this worrying time, she was able to get help at *Learning Club* to keep up, thanks to kind-hearted supporters like you.

“From the start, it’s been so good to get that extra time and help to catch up that I didn’t have at home,” she says.

When Jasmine first arrives at *Learning Club* after school each week, she will debrief with volunteer tutor Chris about her day. Chris will notice if she’s feeling low and helps her focus on her strengths.

“I’ve learnt that if you aren’t in the right mindset, you won’t achieve anything,” says Jasmine. “When I have a bad week, Chris listens and knows how to make me feel motivated with my work.”

After a pep talk, it’s down to business. The pace at school can be very fast as there’s just so much to cover. But at *Learning Club*, Jasmine can take it as slowly as she needs to stay engaged. Chris will patiently explain the maths concepts she’s struggling to grasp. There have been many lightbulb moments, and her passion for learning has gradually returned.

“Once I get the hang of it, Chris lets me do it by myself at my own pace because that’s how I learn best,” says Jasmine. “*Learning Club* is a positive commitment because I’m putting an hour or so into my week for myself. It’s self-care and putting myself first.”

Every parent wants their child to be happy and succeed at school. Jasmine’s mum and dad are no different. They believe in the power of *Learning Club*, driving the twins there and monitoring their progress.

“Dad has been passionate about getting our grades up,” says Jasmine. “He is very intrigued by *Learning Club* and at the end of the session he will often have a catch up with our tutor.”

Jasmine is now in Year 12 and thriving. With help from her *Learning Club* tutor and wonderful supporters like you, she has taken big steps forward with maths, putting her dream to study psychology or law at university within reach.

But it’s so much more than that. *Learning Club* has also helped Jasmine become more resilient and increased her awareness of her personal values and aspirations. She has more skills to thrive in the adult world post-school.

“My goal is to have a career where I can help people,” she says. “I want to use my voice – and be there for people who can’t use theirs,” says Jasmine.



Jasmine at her *Learning Club* with our volunteer Chris

Meet a woman devoted to ensuring students aren't left behind

My name is Claire. I'm a *Learning for Life* Coordinator at The Smith Family. I provide long-term support and information to students and families about their education.

I often work with students from single parent families or grandparent carer families. I also work with a large number of families from non-English speaking backgrounds. Some of their challenges include economic disadvantage, living off one single parent income or an age pension. Or still finding their feet in a country after fleeing war or political turmoil.

Our students have access to programs including *student2student*, *Learning Clubs*, and *Career Mentoring*. These programs help students to have the best opportunity to get the most out of their education.

“The *Learning for Life* program helps children to achieve their best in school now and in the future by providing support from the first year at school right through to the end of year 12 and on to further study.”

I have been working with a student who has a learning disability. They have repeated the last year of primary school. And their family had some worries about the student's readiness to transition to high school.

In discussion with the parents and the student, we decided that the *student2student* program would be a good fit. This reading program would give the student peer support of a reading buddy. It also builds up the confidence in their literacy and ability to transition into high school.

I also supported this student to be linked in early to their high school. And we discussed additional learning concerns and potential support available. This has really helped put the family's mind at ease in regards to the transition which is fantastic.

Your support is paramount in making these programs possible. They give our students opportunities to catch up and keep up in school.

I have always been passionate about helping families and students in their education journey. I enjoy working through the challenges and supporting the successes our students have.

Education transforms lives, not just minds. Thank you for believing in our vision of creating opportunities for every child so they can build a better future for themselves.

Claire, Learning for Life Coordinator



Declan gave books a second chance and found joy in the pages

At age 10, Year 5 student Declan would tell anyone who'd listen he hoped to be a policeman one day. But Declan's mum Cassandra felt worried about his reading problems and low confidence. Both could block him from his dream.



Declan, *student2student* participant

Cassandra was unable to support Declan's learning as much as she'd like, especially with reading, which he didn't enjoy. "Declan's biological father is dyslexic, and we suspect this got passed on to him too," she says.

When Declan was invited to join The Smith Family's learning programs, Cassandra was impressed by the range of extracurricular activities he could join to help him catch up and keep up. "I thought the programs were excellent," she says.

Through our *Digital Access* program, made possible by our philanthropic partners, Declan received a free laptop. This helped him stay connected to his class during lockdowns.

"At the time, I was struggling to even cover our groceries and petrol, so we really couldn't afford an internet connection," says Cassandra. "But Declan also received free WiFi through The Smith Family. That made a massive difference to us."

Even so, remote lessons were tough for Declan and his learning suffered setbacks.

"I was so relieved when he could finally go back to school," Cassandra says. It was then Declan decided to join *student2student*, our out-of-school reading peer support program.

Declan was paired up with his buddy Matteo. Matteo would call Declan twice a week to chat, listen to him read and help him sound out hard words.

"Suddenly, Declan was falling in love with reading," says Cassandra.

In the two years since, Declan has moved up six reading levels at school and, remarkably, will read anything and everything!

"I read before bed and in the morning at school with my class. I love Harry Potter, fantasy, and adventure books," Declan says.

"Our lives have changed dramatically since Declan started *student2student*," says Cassandra. "We feel so supported and Declan can do much more than before."

In fact, now Declan's reading confidence from *student2student* is spilling over into other subjects.

"My favourite subject is maths because I'm good at it, and I also love art and drawing, science and sport," says Declan. "I am enjoying school now because I know a lot more words."

As a supporter of students like Declan, this is how you disrupt disadvantage, helping them take small but crucial steps to achieve their long-term aspirations.

"I've wanted to become a policeman since I was a little boy, and that's still my dream," says Declan. "My mum and teacher are so proud of me for how far I've come."

From awkward silences to priceless conversations: the transformational power of a mentor

Meet Billy, one of our very special volunteers with a big heart for helping students plan for life after school. He shares some of the challenges and unforgettable moments of life as an *iTrack* mentor.

Q. Why did you decide to sign up to be an *iTrack* mentor?

I've learned a lot from having mentors at different points in my life, and so the opportunity to pass on whatever wisdom I've gathered so far in life was something I jumped at. With the benefit of hindsight, I think that your teenage years are when you could probably do with some advice the most (whether at the time you realise it or not!). Some of the things that still stick with me are things I learned back then, from my parents, from teachers, and from others in my community.

Q. What kinds of things did you talk with the student about in your mentoring sessions?

Mentoring sessions can be a little slow to start off with. Students often take a bit of time to warm up and taking the time to establish a bit of a rapport – no mean feat over text – is important. Each student is different, but I typically have found that they're curious about how the world beyond high school works. Some of the students know what they want to do, so we chatted about university entry requirements, career pathways, and scholarships. Others are in an earlier phase, so we chat about their interests, what their more immediate high school elective choices are, and different possibilities that could open up for them.

Q. What was the most rewarding part of being a mentor?

Having the chance to connect with a student and know that you've helped them in some small way. There are some conversations you have where you can see that you've been able to trigger an 'Aha!' moment for a student or exposed them to a different way of thinking. The excitement that you can see – they start chatting with more questions, very quickly – is very gratifying.

Q. What value do you think the program brings for students?

I think that it can often be difficult for students to have people to talk to about their education in a safe space. Their peers might not think it's cool to be planning ahead, sometimes their family may not have experience in the avenues that they're hoping to pursue, and they may perceive their teachers as authority figures, and be nervous about appearing ignorant. *iTrack* gives them a chance to ask those questions from a friendly adult anonymously, without those worries. I think the most consistent change I saw was students becoming more confident.

Q. What value do you think the program brings for mentors like yourself?

As someone who finished high school multiple decades ago, I think it's so valuable to be able to revisit that phase of life. You quickly realise that your circumstances are different, and the context that today's students are in has also changed, and being able to learn about what teenagers today think and care about is such a gift.

***iTrack* is an online mentoring program over 18 weeks. Students are matched with a trained adult mentor from a professional background to help guide them in their area of interest. Students receive advice and support on their post-school plans in one-hour sessions delivered via secure online chat.**



Billy, *iTrack* mentor

Snapshot from SmArts

As part of The Smith Family's *Growing Careers Project*, students from one of our partner schools in regional NSW attended a SmArts creative enrichment program at Create Hub Wagga Wagga, Wiradjuri Country. Eighteen students were engaged and keen to learn about art. They were taught different patterns, colours, shades and designed their own artworks on a canvas. And here are some of them!



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