

# LEARNING CATALYSTS: IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

In 2013, ISSR, in partnership with The Smith Family, the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University and The University of New South Wales, was successful in its application for an ARC Linkage grant aimed at improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children. This project had two specific aims:

1. examine the circumstances of socioeconomically disadvantaged families and students to build an evidence base to better design and implement programs that are intended to improve education outcomes for these students, and
2. identify what factors contribute to improved educational outcomes for students.

The Smith Family is a national Australian charity, established in 1922, with a specific mission to support disadvantaged children and young people to achieve stronger educational outcomes. The Smith Family currently supports over 38,000 students from the first year of school to tertiary education across Australia through its *Learning for Life* program. These students and their families were the project participants.

The *Learning Catalysts Project* combined quantitative analyses of data held by The Smith Family to administer and monitor its *Learning for Life* program, questionnaire data from a project survey of nearly 6000 students and 4500 parents and carers, and qualitative interviews with 31 selected scholarship students and 32 parents or carers.

The project team is currently preparing publications for academic, policy and practitioner audiences. These include papers focused on:

- the factors associated with young people's plans for education and employment after completing school,
- the relationships between health, students' family circumstances and their school engagement, and
- parental engagement and home-school interactions.

The project's findings have been useful to The Smith Family, as they have provided deeper insights into the level of disadvantage among the students it supports, in particular the high levels of health and disability issues and the high rates of school mobility. This information is informing the development of new organisational policies and practices aimed at strengthening the support provided to scholarship students and their families.

The ongoing data analysis and reporting is also contributing to the public policy advocacy work The Smith Family does on behalf of disadvantaged Australian children and young people.

## KEY FINDINGS



One-third of survey respondents live in public housing, in comparison to the Australian national average of approximately 4%.



57% of students have parents or carers who are unemployed or not in the labour force.



There are high rates of health issues within the survey families, with two in five students living with a health issue, and four in five living in a family in which at least one person has a health issue.



There is evidence of high school mobility, with 22% of survey respondents having been at four or more schools, and one in 20 having been at six or more schools.



Some students are missing out on important schooling activities, like excursions and school camps, because of cost.



Students have extracurricular commitments relating to family duties and holding down paid employment. More than a quarter babysit or provide care for family members on a weekly, or more regular, basis. Among senior school students, 28% are in paid work, and among all students, 16% have three or more of these weekly commitments.