

## Changing the Tide - August issue

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2011 SSLC National Forum, SSLP - A participant's perspective, My School and NAPLAN

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## A shift in the pursuit of better education outcomes for Indigenous children

The recent OECD review of Assessment and Evaluation in Education in Australia signals a significant shift in the pursuit of better education outcomes for Indigenous children and clearly NAPLAN and MySchool has undoubtedly furnished a greater sense of transparency and accountability.

What is more significant though is that the increased transparency and accountability has seen a shift in leadership and bureaucratic culture from a time when we lacked the courage to confront the data honestly. This was a time when people stuck their heads in the sand, closed ranks, pretended that everything was fine, shifted the blame, and engaged in manoeuvres to shoot down those challenging the data. There is still some way to go here but thankfully most of this is in the past.

Today I am seeing more courageous bureaucratic leadership that is prepared to face up to the challenges presented by the data and own their responsibility for responding to it. More hard conversations are definitely occurring in which we no longer accept excuses about why Indigenous students are behind, to a demand for explanations about what we must do to respond to this as a challenge for all of us.

My only concern here is that with this renewed culture and focus on the challenges of Indigenous education we will make some improvement and then we get to realise that this is really hard work, and sometimes our efforts may not deliver the returns we would ordinarily expect. What is crucial here is that



we keep going and keep believing we can make a difference. One thing I have come to know from working with Indigenous children and parents is they will listen to our stories of enthusiasm, and wait patiently to see if you are truly committed to overcoming such challenges and there for the long haul. We've seen plenty of people come and go. This is indeed a very hard and very challenging space to work in.

Some of it is easy though and there is some low hanging fruit to pick. There are plenty of Indigenous children getting Cs, and Bs that we can push just a little bit harder to get Bs, and As. There are plenty of Indigenous children with 70 and 80 percent attendance, that we can push just a little bit harder to get 80 and 90 percent attendance.

To every bureaucrat, principal and teacher I would say that while the challenges in Indigenous education are complex, if we stick at it we can do this! We will try some things and enjoy the euphoria of success, and we will try some things and fail and feel disenchanting. This is not the time to walk away! This is the time to reflect and be energised by the things we have done well, and to learn from things that we could have done better or differently. This is the time to signal to Indigenous children and parents that we are indeed committed and there for the long haul. If we can demonstrate resilience and tenacity here, Indigenous children and parents will certainly come to believe that we really are serious about education, and this will furnish the potential for a much more vibrant and dynamic relationship between us.

**Chris Sarra**  
Executive Director

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## **Stronger Smarter Learning Communities 2011 National Forum**

The Stronger Smarter Learning Communities (SSLC) project is utilising the national network of quality school leaders by developing strength and evidence-based approaches to systematically improve outcomes for Indigenous students in a diverse range of school types and community contexts. On Monday 22nd and Tuesday 23rd August, the SSLC held its second National Forum at the Park Regis Hotel in Brisbane which brought together over 40 hub school principals and leaders from across Australia along with researchers and representatives from education departments.



*Innovation Forum Sessions on Day 1*

After a Welcome to Country by Raymond Walker, the Forum was officially opened by QUT Academic Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ken Bowman followed by a personal welcome message by Dr Chris Sarra. The morning session on day one saw SSLC Principal Network Coordinator, Iqbal Singh outline the objectives of this year's forum which involved reviewing the future planning of the network. Also discussed were the research findings collected thus far over the past year which were presented by members of the QUT Core Research Evaluation Team.



*Principals and School Leaders completing research surveys*

The afternoon session saw principals and leaders break into small groups to take part in their own innovation forums where they discussed the challenging issues that they face on a daily basis in their school communities. This process allowed school leaders to identify and unpack key issues such as attendance, cultural competence, and literacy and numeracy (just to name a few) that impact their school's journey in delivering positive transformational change in Indigenous education.

Stronger Smarter school leaders were challenged to have hard conversations about how they can develop and update the existing database of

successful strategies whilst confidently and successfully addressing the issues confronting their schools and communities to succeed in achieving positive outcomes. School leaders spent time exploring new and innovative strategies on how to deliver improved outcomes for Indigenous students discussing how they can successfully develop a framework for uploading information and accessing support.

Day two of the forum involved continued planning around research and the Learning Communities project as a whole, but more importantly, school principals and leaders were given the opportunity to report back on their findings from the innovation forums and also make recommendations. One of the main outcomes of the forum was the development of a paper articulating some of the thinking from network leaders on how these key issues could be addressed. The insights from the diversity of expertise at the forum have proven to be an invaluable innovative resource for school leaders, researchers, education departments and governments in the 'closing the gap' agenda.



*Principals' Network Coordinator, Iqbal Singh, addressing the attendees on Day 1*

This year's National Forum was a great success and a fantastic two days with SSLC leaders returning to their schools feeling renewed, energised and inspired for the next year to come. A big thank you to all who attended and those who helped in making it all happen.

### **Iqbal Singh**

Principal Network Co-ordinator

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## **Stronger Smarter Leadership Program - "Where to now?" A participant's perspective**

"Where to now?" is the question many of us ask when we complete the residential part of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program.

Recently I had the opportunity to co-facilitate with the Stronger Smarter team in Broome. This is the third year of the Kimberley-based program and it continues to grow; to the point where fifty seven people participated in two groups this year.

My journey began at last year's Stronger Smarter Kimberley leadership program with three colleagues from Fitzroy Valley District High School.

When it was done and dusted we went back with a clear idea of the first challenge we needed to face; to build understanding of the context of our students for all staff.

We identified this challenge because we believed all staff can continue to build genuine and sustainable relationships with students and community. This we felt would enhance learning and enhance our school culture.

So did we turn this "rhetoric into reality"?

We were enabled and supported by our Principal, Paul Jefferies, as he believed what we were doing was important.

We worked together and implemented a number of Stronger Smarter rituals to enable understanding to become more than rhetoric.

The High School in particular has continued to grow into a calm and understanding environment. At the administration level we continue to foster 'checking in' - a process familiar to those who have attended Stronger Smarter Leadership forums - and we place high value on critical professional discussion.

What this looks like is an Administration meeting on a Wednesday and breakfast on Friday to 'check in' for the week and discuss how we are travelling.

Other simple but powerful Stronger Smarter rituals and strategies such as 'the circle' in whole staff meetings and High School cluster meetings, 'checking in' and 'checking out' and the introduction of 'perceptual positioning' and 'social processes' have enabled the space for discussion and most importantly buy in, particularly in the High School.

Shifting the way in which conversation occurs has given staff members the opportunity to seek clarification and air concerns. However, we have a long way to go.

My recent involvement in the Program as a co-facilitator has highlighted the need for coordinated approaches to meeting and overcoming complex challenges.

As a school we are now in the fortunate position where the entire Administration team has completed the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program.

Our current Principal, Donna Bridge, is committed to improving and renewing the entire staff/school culture through the five Stronger Smarter meta-strategies. With the premise being that all Aboriginal students can continue to learn as well as any other student in the country.

When the Stronger Smarter Leadership journey has just begun how do you implement the learning you take away from it; particularly when it is wrapped up in so much emotion?

What this means for us is that we have the structures in place to effect more positive change, particularly around complex challenges. We have the belief and expectation that as a team we have the ability to tackle the complex challenge of renewing staff culture.

This started recently with the opportunity to reconnect with what makes us strong, challenge the way in which we have discussions through perceptual positioning and the realities of deficit discourse.

Looking ahead, we will be flexible in the way in which we create change around complex challenges. Our work utilises a number of the tools and strategies featured in the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program including 'Engoori' and the power of shifting the conversations, considering multiple perspectives and honouring our stories and strengths.

We will keep planning and implementing strategies that are relevant to our context and our challenges.

What this has shown me is that it is important to make time to reflect on the development and implementation of strategies and processes in classrooms and schools through conversation. It is more and more apparent that the reflection process is as important as the planning for implementation and closing the gap between rhetoric and reality.

As a team we cannot afford to lose sight of the fact that continuing to revisit the question, "Where to now?" is important in achieving our goal of high expectations and quality outcomes for Aboriginal kids.

#### **Dan Walker**

Student Services Coordinator  
Fitzroy Valley District High School

### **Share your Stronger Smarter journey.**

Email [SSI\\_Enquiries@qut.edu.au](mailto:SSI_Enquiries@qut.edu.au) or post your story on our [Facebook](#) page.



*Dan Walker - Stronger Smarter Leadership Program, Broome WA*

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