

Forbes North Public School

Location: Outer Regional NSW



"The whole Stronger Smarter philosophy and approach underpins what we do for our kids in our school, whether they're Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal"

Steve McAlister, Principal, Forbes North Public School

When Steve McAlister first heard about the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program, he didn't think it would be relevant to him. At the time he was working in a small school with no Aboriginal students, and even though he was impressed by some of the work being done, he says, "I couldn't see the relevance for me. I didn't make the connection that it wasn't just about Aboriginal education."

After becoming Principal at Forbes North Public School, where 39 percent of the 270 students are Indigenous, Steve says he took up the opportunity to attend the Leadership Program in 2015 because he thought it might be more relevant. "But," he says, "I had no idea how relevant it would be. It just blew me away. The whole philosophy and approach underpins what we do for our kids in our school, whether they're Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, through that understanding of cultural

identity of our kids and the people we work with in the community."

Forbes North is an award-winning school with strong Indigenous programs and good attendance and academic results. However, Steve still felt the Stronger Smarter approach could benefit the school, and was something he needed to introduce immediately. After the week at the Program, Steve says he was able to take away strategies, tools and ideas and start implementing them in the school the next day. "To walk into any sort of professional learning and walk out and actually find yourself using strategies and tools and ideas from that training after just a week ... it's unheard of for me. I've never experienced that in anything else," Steve says.

Staff and student Outcomes

Attendance	Attendance Rates consistently above state average. Attendance rates for Indigenous students consistently around 91%, rising to 92% in 2019.
Academic results	NAPLAN participation has been 99% to 100% over the past few years. Since 2014, results have been consistently at or above similar schools, with Year 3 writing results close to all Australian students in 2018.
Language lessons	Fortnightly Wiradjuri language lessons for every class

A circle of twenty-five chairs

Steve says his experience of professional development programs over thirty years in education is that you sit at a table, write on butcher's paper and watch presentations on a screen. So to walk into the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program to find a circle of twenty-five chairs in the middle of the room and a whiteboard over in the corner, Steve says was 'really confronting'. His initial thoughts were to wonder how he would be able to interact with people he mostly didn't know over the period of a week. However, he says with another staff member from his school and two staff from another school in Forbes, they were able to 'start bouncing ideas off each other straight away.' By the end of the week he knew Stronger Smarter was something they had to pursue at Forbes North.

Steve says by the time he returned to the Program Follow Up two months later, he realised he was now using Stronger Smarter every day without even thinking about it. He says, 'It's not something you consciously say, 'what part of Stronger Smarter can I use in this situation, or with this issue, or to move this forward?' It just happens. And then you reflect on it later and realise that's exactly what Stronger Smarter is about.'" Steve remains in regular contact with participants from the program and he says, "It's not just me who feels like that. I know from catching up with them... it's had that effect on everyone."

Implementing Stronger Smarter at Forbes North

Steve says he has noticed that different school leaders choose to implement

Stronger Smarter in different ways. Steve's decision was to get things going at Forbes North immediately, so that staff would want to learn more. He started by changing the structure of staff meetings to introduce a yarning circle with check-ins and check-outs. He says this wasn't an easy thing to do. "We work in such a triangular, top-down structure in our organisations that it can be quite daunting to take the edges off that triangle and circle up", he says. "That triangle approach is so branded in our minds that there's a long way to go before we can actually say we trust each other enough to go with our feelings, and speak about our thoughts without worrying about what the other person or the supervisor might be thinking and might be filing away for later."

He also needed to think about how he set up the yarning circle. "The first couple of times I arranged our chairs in a circle, sat down and waited for people to come. No-one sat next to me. The chairs on either side of me remained empty, and the chairs

either side of those chairs were empty", he says. "So I still felt like the pointy end of the circle". So he now sets up the chairs, leaves the room and lets other people come in first, and places himself in a chair with people on either side.

Steve continues to use other Stronger Smarter processes as professional development exercises for staff to focus on strengths, use feedback processes with each other, and prompt discussion on key issues. Staff then take some of these activities into the classroom to help them to better understand their students. Steve says that as he gets a critical mass of people 'on the same page', they will be in a position to have those rich, deep conversations.

Building a New School Culture

When Steve took up the role of Principal in 2013, Forbes North Public School already had a number of Aboriginal education initiatives in place, and had won awards. Overall attendance in 2014 was 94%.



NAPLAN results for 2014 show the school was doing as well as or better than 'like schools' on all measures. The school's Wiradjuri Language Program runs fortnightly for all students from Years 1 to 6, and there is always a line-up of kids who want to join the Wiradjuri Choir.

However, Steve says as the staff involved in the original development of various programs move elsewhere and new staff come in, some of the coherence of programs can get lost. Each new program comes in isolation, without that all-encompassing understanding and drive across the school to tie it all together. For instance, Steve says the school uses the Eight Ways of Knowing, but some of the connections have been lost along the way. Their Eight Ways Garden has beautiful granite blocks with symbols on them, but is now in an 'out of bounds' area of the school rather than being a place where kids can go and understand its meaning and how it fits with their learning. "It's too important to have it just sitting there as a monument", Steve says. Their highly-regarded Wiradjuri Language Program is also in danger of losing momentum as staff leave, and has dropped from weekly classes run by several language tutors to fortnightly classes provided by just one tutor and one coordinator who prepare language classes for the entire school.

Steve says the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program has given him the opportunity to reflect on what has and is being done at the school, and what can be improved. Steve says Stronger Smarter

has given him a framework to start thinking about how to tie everything together and renew their school culture. "We needed to shake it up", he says. But he also recognises that this isn't about throwing out the old culture. "There are plenty of good programs and good aspects to our school," he says, "So we bring those in and make them a foundation of the culture we build." Steve says the school is ready to start a new phase of the journey. "Even though I've been at the school for two and a half years, it feels like a new start," he says.

A new phase of the journey

Building a new culture will mean working with new staff and the community to make sure there is a shared understanding about the programs at the school. "We assume that people understand, and we assume that people have been involved and engaged and part of the planning and even the evaluation of these things, but it's not necessarily the case", Steve says.

He has set up an Aboriginal Engagement Committee with the Indigenous staff in the school to look at how to "make the school a more inviting place for our community and give more ownership to our community of what the school does." Steve runs the meetings as a yarning circle, and says the initial meeting was quite challenging. "The people on the committee understood the relevance of the circle and knew they could speak their minds. The yarning circle approach – where everything's valid and valued – they were

more comfortable with that, so they quite openly challenged me about a couple of decisions which, unbeknownst to me, had actually alienated the community, rather than included them.” Since these meetings, Steve says there has been much stronger communication between the Aboriginal staff members and himself which gives him a greater awareness of the impacts of his decisions. “We’re more aware of what each other’s doing, and why we’re doing it,” he says.

Steve is working with the other public schools in Forbes to bring the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program to their community in 2016. In particular they want to bring the Forbes High School on board so the schools in Forbes can work together. Steve says he will send four or five of his staff to the program, and is encouraging other school principals to make Stronger Smarter a key priority because “it will change your school enormously.”

Be the change ...

Steve says one of the most valuable aspects of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program was in reflecting on his own beliefs and understandings. “I haven’t seen anything that comes close to Stronger Smarter in making you reflect on your beliefs and what underpins what you do. It has had a huge effect on my relationships with the kids at the school, my colleagues and even my family.” He recognises he needs to ‘be the change you want to see in the world’, and says staff will need to see this personal change if he is to

bring the rest of the circle with him and get the critical mass of staff working together towards the same cultural change.

Steve says Stronger Smarter has given him a framework to underpin the various Indigenous cultural programs at Forbes North Public School and tie everything together. He hopes this will signify the start of a renewed school culture, in which the staff and the community work together with a shared understanding of what they want to do for the kids. “It’s only early days, and we’re going to trip and stumble from time to time,” he says. “It’s going to be quite a journey I think.”

In 2020, Steve is still the Principal at Forbes North, and he continues to send staff to the SSLP.