Results of the 2024 Stronger Smarter Census

Stronger Smarter Institute

Contents

Summary

The 2024 Stronger Smarter Census was the fifth Census survey. With this data, the Institute has a data set of **2,336** Stronger Smarter alumni who have completed at least one Census survey representing **44%** of total alumni. This data tells a powerful story.

Firstly, the data shows that the Workplace Challenges Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP) participants set for themselves are both meaningful and implementable. Across the five surveys, **85%** of respondents reported that they had completed or were still working on their Workplace Challenge. Stronger Smarter alumni are enacting transformative change in their classrooms, schools and workplaces.

While not everyone can complete their planned Workplace Challenge, perhaps due to changing circumstances, roles or schools, this does not necessarily stop individuals from making changes to their own workplace practice. Across the five surveys**, 86%** of respondents had made ongoing changes to the way they interact with students and build positive student identity and high expectations.

The data highlights the power of High-Expectations Relationships. One respondent explained, that while they had always held high expectations, understanding how to maintain this through relationships was what needed to change.

Respondents describe how High-Expectations Relationships are infused throughout their daily work. Many respondents recognised the need to build High-Expectations Relationships with colleagues first before working on projects for change. Likewise, building High-Expectations Relationship with students, parents and families is an integral part of ensuring change in the classroom.

Enacting the Stronger Smarter Approach in schools is an ongoing process. It takes time. A school that starts a journey may need to pause when circumstances change. However, regardless of what is happening at the school level, Stronger Smarter alumni are changing their teaching practice, and this is making a difference. Students are in classrooms where their teacher takes the time to get to know them, and they can see that their teacher believes in them. These students feel they belong, have high expectations for themselves, and believe in their own ability to achieve.

The story is different in every school. The priorities are different, the challenges are different, and the successes are different. However, each one is based on the same values and processes – taking a strength-based approach, rejecting deficit language, making sure teachers are all enacting the same high expectations, and building relationships across the entire school community.

Overwhelmingly, responses from Stronger Smarter alumni show that taking the time to build relationships does matter. Building High-Expectations Relationships in schools is a key factor in ensuring that the right conditions are in place for change. When these values drive the way the school operates, then transformative change is happening.

Introduction

The 2024 Stronger Smarter Census is a comprehensive survey of all alumni of the Institute's flagship programs, the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP), and the Stronger Smarter Jarjums Program (SSJP). These programs are a first step in enacting the Stronger Smarter Approach (SSA) in schools and organisations.

The 2024 Census was the fifth Census survey. Surveys in 2016, 2018, and 2020 focussed on the impact of the SSLP/SSJP in the Personal Sphere. The 2022 survey focussed more deeply on the enactment of the SSA and the impact and outcomes of this enactment.

The Census surveys have several aims:

▶ Responses to both open-ended (text) and closed-ended questions are used as part of a wider data set to gain a deeper insight into how alumni enact the Stronger Smarter Approach in their schools. This also informs the development of new products and resources for the Institute.

▶ The Census provides one data source to explore the extent of embeddedness of the Stronger Smarter Approach in schools.

▶ Respondents are asked to update their details (workplaces, roles) and whether they have moved into a greater leadership position since completing the program.

A note on the results

In viewing the results, please note:

▶ Where respondents chose 'not applicable' this has not been included in results.

▶ The Census is voluntary. It is likely, therefore that alumni who choose to answer the survey are the most engaged in the program and most likely to have made changes to workplace practice.

▶ Many respondents have changed schools since undertaking the SSLP/SSJP. Responses are often a mixture of activities that have occurred in different schools.

▶ The focus of this report is on schools and school communities. However, the Census also includes responses from SSLP/SSJP respondents who do not work in schools.

▶ Graphs and reports use the shortened groupings as shown in the table to the right.

Term used in graphs	Included
School leadership	Principal or Deputy Principal
Lead teacher	Lead teacher or department head
Teacher Aide	Includes other classroom support roles
Aboriginal Education Worker	Includes other similar roles such as AIEO, AEW, IEW, AEO, KESO
Other education support	Education support roles not in schools.

Survey Completion

The 2024 Census comprised two separate surveys.

- ▶ **Survey A:** Alumni who had not previously completed a Census survey received the full survey.
- ▶ **Survey B:** Alumni who had completed a previous survey received a shorter version with some more in-depth questions.

Across both surveys there were 470 full completions and 78 partial completions.

Across the five surveys run since 2016, the Institute now has a data set of **2,336** alumni who have completed at least one Census survey. This data includes participants from every year of the SSLP/SSJP.

Surveys from 2016 – 2024

44%

of all SSLP and SSJP alumni
have responded to at least one survey.

Respondents in 2024 Survey A (full Census) had mostly completed the SSLP/SSJP in the last four years.

Survey A- Year of SSLP/ SSJP
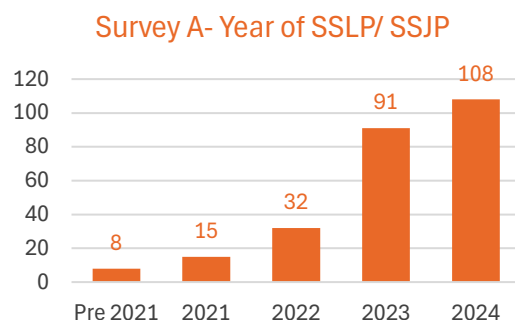
Survey A 2024.

97%

of respondents
had completed the SSLP/SSJP in the last 4 years

78%

of respondents
had completed the SSLP/SSJP in the last 2 years

Respondents in Survey B (alumni who had completed a previous Census) were spread across all years of program attendance. This included participants from the first year of the SSLP/SSJP in 2006. Participants were asked to describe the aim, strategy (how) and outcomes of their Workplace Challenge or other project. Some of these are shown as text boxes throughout the report.

Survey B - Year of SSLP/ SSJP
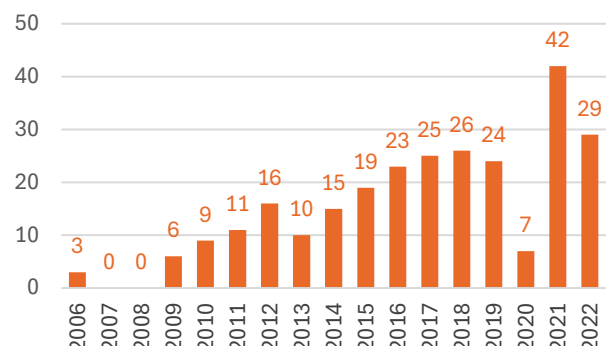
Demographics

2024 Surveys A and B

44%

of respondents

were employed at principal or school leadership level.

83%

of respondents

work in schools.

Data from Survey A (full Census) shows that program participants range from early career teachers through to experienced school leadership.

How many years have you been in the teaching profession?
Survey A 2024

Bar chart values:
- 0 - 5 years: 25
- 6 - 10 years: 26
- 11 - 15 years: 40
- 16 - 20 years: 49
- 21 - 25 years: 43
- More than 25 years: 53
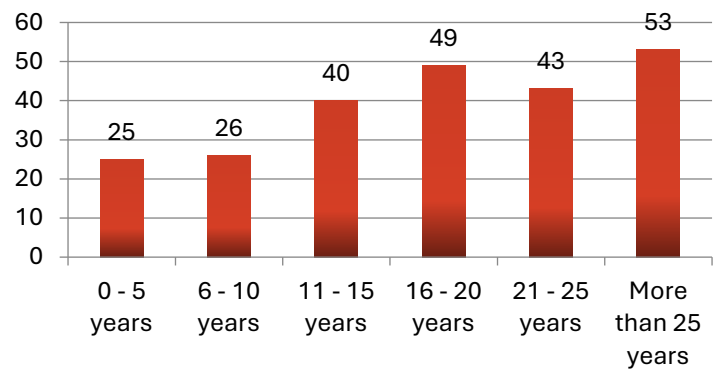
Current role
Surveys A and B

Pie chart:
- School leadership: 27%
- Lead teacher or department head: 16%
- Teacher: 28%
- Teacher aide/ classroom support: 5%
- AEO or similar: 7%
- Government role: 4%
- Community organisation: 3%
- Other education support role (not in a school): 11%
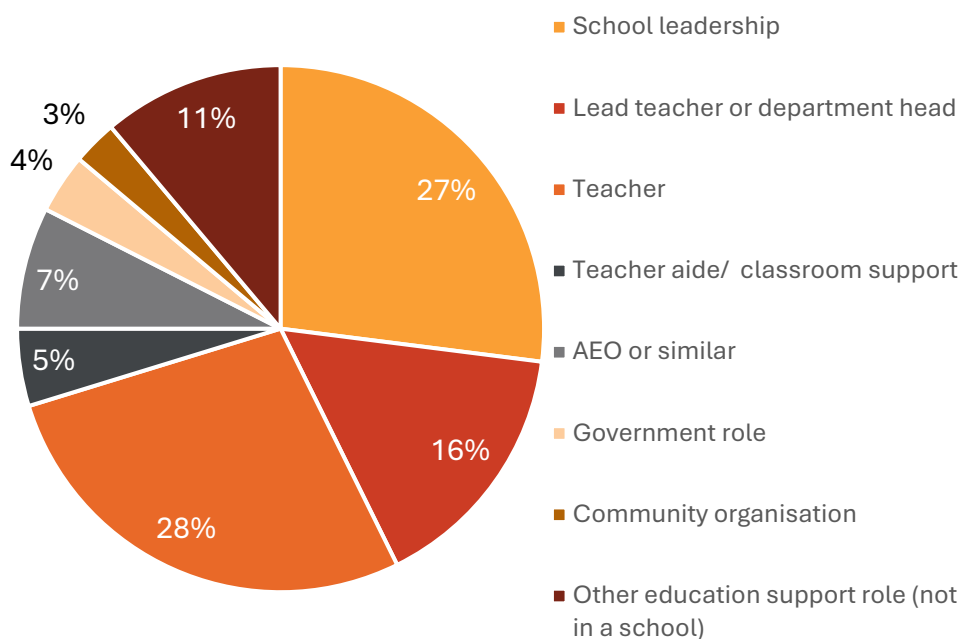
Workplace challenges

All program participants in the SSLP and SSJP leave the program with a series of 'challenges' or action research projects. These include a Personal Sphere challenge and a Workplace Challenge which can be in either, or both, of the School and Community Spheres.

Many Workplace Challenges involve building High-Expectations Relationships with staff, students, or parents.

Census surveys, together with alumni reports at follow up sessions, show that almost every participant takes something away from the program as a Workplace Challenge to implement in their workplace. Many participants go beyond their original Workplace Challenge to set other 'challenges' in the future.

Combined alumni census data 2006 - 2024

85%

of respondents

had either completed or were still working on their challenge.

45%

of respondents

report that they completed their original challenge and went on to set themselves new challenges.

Participants in recent programs (2023 – 2024) were more likely to report that they were still working on their Workplace Challenge.

Workplace Challenges
2006 - 2022

- Completed and set new challenges
- Completed
- Completed no benefit
- Still working on it
- Didn't complete
- Didn't undertake
- Don't remember
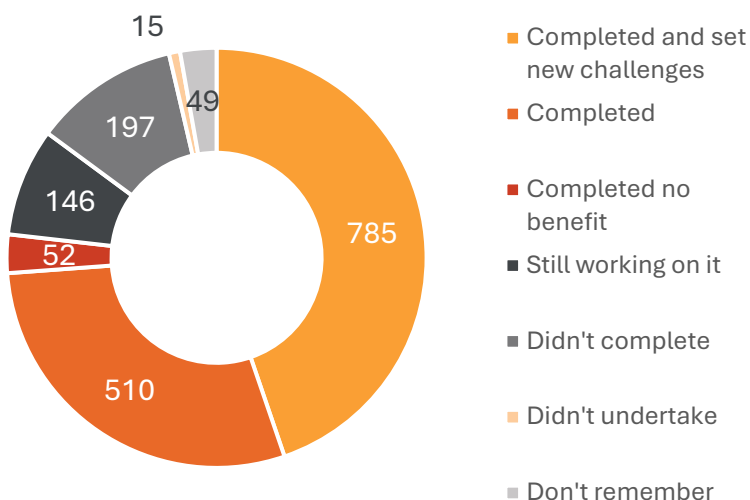
Workplace Challenges
2023 - 2024

Outcomes

As shown in the table to the right, respondents report a range of outcomes for students, the learning environment, involvement of community, and staff collaboration. These show the variety of Workplace Challenges which vary depending on the point the school is at in the implementation of the Stronger Smarter Approach.

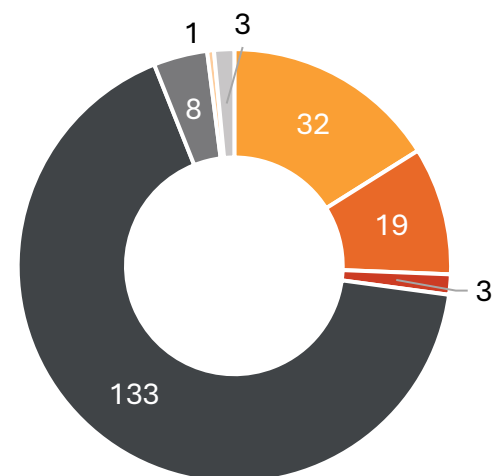It is clear, however, that all reported outcomes are a step towards improved learning environments and ultimately greater student engagement.

The Word Cloud shows how ideas such as relationships, collaboration, engagement, expectations, connections and cultural change feature strongly in responses to the survey question on outcomes.

Student Outcomes

▶ Improved behaviour, attendance, engagement and performance.

▶ Students more ready to learn and passionate about their work.

▶ Happier students, sense of trust, respectful relationships.

▶ Students proud of who they are, with greater connection to culture.

Community Involvement

▶ Community more comfortable with the school, with voices heard.

▶ Greater involvement in events such as NAIDOC week.

▶ Deepened participation in decision making.

Learning Environment

▶ High-Expectations Relationships bringing greater cohesion and inclusion.

▶ Culturally safe classrooms.

▶ Increased embedding of Indigenous Knowledges in curriculum.

Staff

▶ Increased staff collegiality

▶ Shared understandings of high expectations and strength-based approaches.

▶ More empathy, increased morale, more energy in the workplace.

▶ Broader understanding of Aboriginal perspectives and how to embed them in the curriculum.

Implementation

In undertaking their Workplace Challenge, alumni had often collaborated with other staff (see the graph below). Respondents described how enacting the SSA required the support of both colleagues and leadership.

76%

of respondents

had worked with others to implement elements of the Stronger Smarter Approach in their workplace.
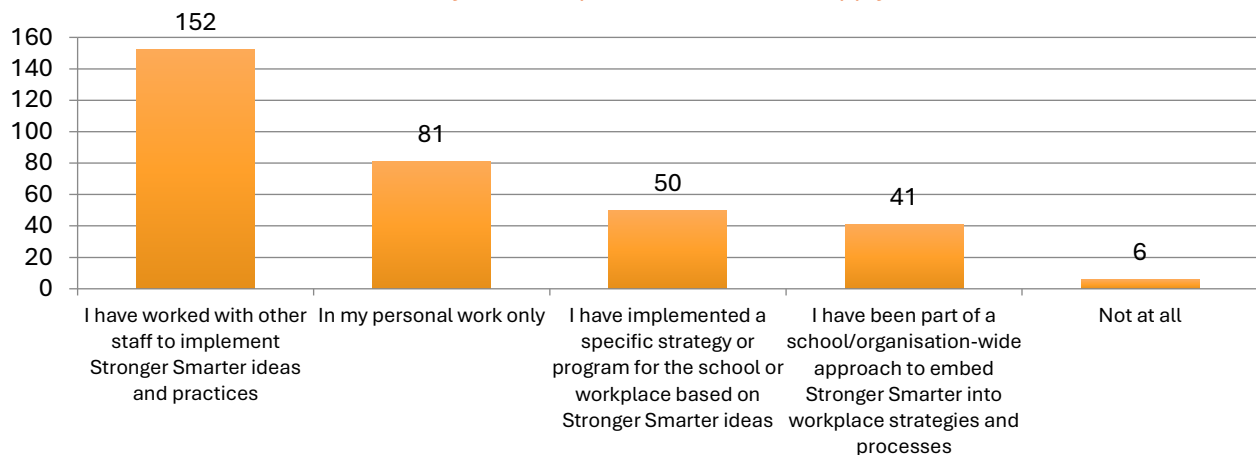
Some Workplace Challenges are more individual and relate to changes in the classroom. For many, personally implementing the SSA is about 'how' they do their job rather than something that takes additional time.

Other Workplace Challenges involve sharing thoughts and ideas with other staff. Respondents describe using processes or tools from the SSLP/SSJP and using the Stronger Smarter language of high expectations.

Many respondents talk about building High-Expectations Relationships. This is often the stepping stone to cultural change in the school, with discussions about valuing strengths and relationships, seeing the importance of doing something differently, and ensuring that change is prioritised. The underpinning Stronger Smarter values and ways of working need to be in place before change can happen.

To what extent have you personally implemented elements of the SSA in your workplace?
Survey A - Participants choose all that apply

Category	Value
I have worked with other staff to implement Stronger Smarter ideas and practices	152
In my personal work only	81
I have implemented a specific strategy or program for the school or workplace based on Stronger Smarter ideas	50
I have been part of a school/organisation-wide approach to embed Stronger Smarter into workplace strategies and processes	41
Not at all	6

Support

The 2024 Census asked two questions about the Workplace Challenge.

▶ What supported you in your Workplace Challenge, and

▶ What roadblocks did you find in implementing your Workplace Challenge'.

As expected, the most important factors in a successful Workplace Challenge are the support from school leadership and colleagues. The SSA needs to be a whole school approach and implemented in a group setting. Even where participants are implementing changes in their own practice, having someone to discuss this with was important.

Having a wise and supportive colleague with deep experience of SSLP has been so enriching for me both personally and professionally. We regularly talk, check in and collaborate on ways to move forward.

Education Officer, QLD

In many cases, the implementation of the SSA involves changing a staff culture. Whatever the 'problem' that alumni may be trying to solve within their workplace, the key to making changes are the mindset and values that are brought forward in seeking solutions.

School Leadership/ Colleagues

▶ School focus on high standards
▶ Willing to listen
▶ Latitude for staff to try new ideas
▶ Collective goals
▶ Team approach
▶ Shifting deficit language and biases
▶ Open to change

Personal

▶ Finding confidence in myself
▶ Reflecting and shifting personal mindsets
▶ Celebrating success
▶ Putting myself in other's shoes
▶ Relational leadership skills
▶ Changing behaviours and attitudes towards teaching

Stronger Smarter Values and Tools

▶ High-Expectations Relationships
▶ Strength-based approaches
▶ Relational aspects of school leadership
▶ Stronger Smarter values and underlying philosophical beliefs
▶ Stronger Smarter language
▶ Posters and processes

Planning

▶ Building collective goals
▶ Taking manageable steps
▶ Clear plan of action
▶ Knowing that change is slow and not giving up
▶ Stronger Smarter networks

A number of respondents reported roadblocks around fixed staff mindsets: staff who were defensive, fearful of change, wanting to stay within comfort zones, to stick with what they know and not willing to move outside established ways of thinking. Policy and bureaucracy, high staff turnover, changes in leadership, and lack of time were also reported as roadblocks. Some respondents describe how institutional, and system mindsets are 'still seeped in the past.'

In contrast many respondents described how they had supportive leadership who value the Stronger Smarter Approach, who are open to change and willing to provide the space for staff to try out ideas. This is often where leadership and colleagues have also undertaken the SSLP/SSJP and understand the language and values of the SSA. In these cases, alumni are reporting positive change.

My voice was lifted in my workplace, and I am now making clearer decisions about my future ways of working in education.

Regional CEC, QLD

Having the support of other colleagues who have completed the SSJP at work was crucial. It meant that I could be in dialogue with someone who understands the struggles and could embrace the discomfort of uncertainty and welcome hope in a multitude of perspectives that's grounded in respect.

Pre-school Teacher, NSW

Respondents also described how the SSLP had helped them to build greater confidence.

In my role as a teacher aide, traditionally the triangle system of hierarchy does not always (rarely) provide me with the place to have a voice. Stronger Smarter provided me with the safe space to have a voice and this has spilled over into my workplace. I no longer wait for the "space" for me to have a voice - I make my own "space"

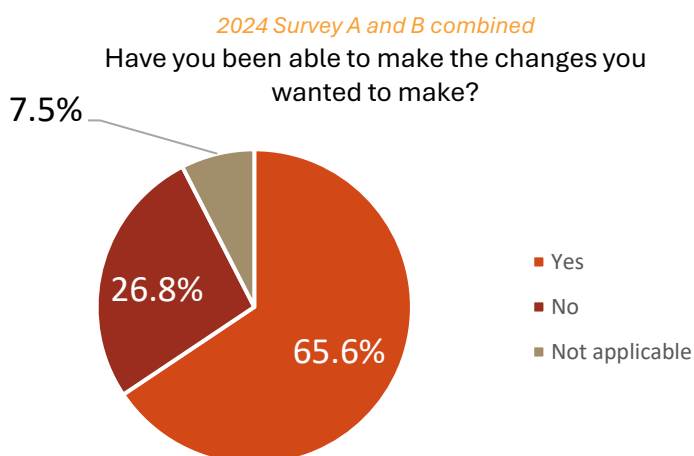**School Officer (teacher aide), QLD**

Changes in the workplace

In the 2024 Census, for both surveys combined, 66% of respondents said they had been able to make the changes they wanted to make in the workplace. This is similar to the data from the previous four surveys (when taking the most recent response from each respondent).

Survey A 2024

66%
of respondents

said they had been able to make the changes they wanted to make in the workplace.

2024 Survey A and B combined
Have you been able to make the changes you wanted to make?

7.5%

26.8%

65.6%

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

Listening to community

Aim:

Improvement in school expectations and listening to community.

How:

We led three sessions co - designed with community on developing an understanding of education and the impact of this at the school.

Outcomes:

Clear understanding by staff of the connection education had and its importance in the community. An understanding of local culture and history of the community and its impact, deeper understanding and sharing of what makes us who we are in a genuine way, empowerment of community members and parents to lead change and voice in the school, students seeing parents and elders lead this with non-Aboriginal people.

Principal, remote WA

Where respondents have not been able to make their planned changes, this was usually a result of either lack of support or changing circumstances such as moving schools.
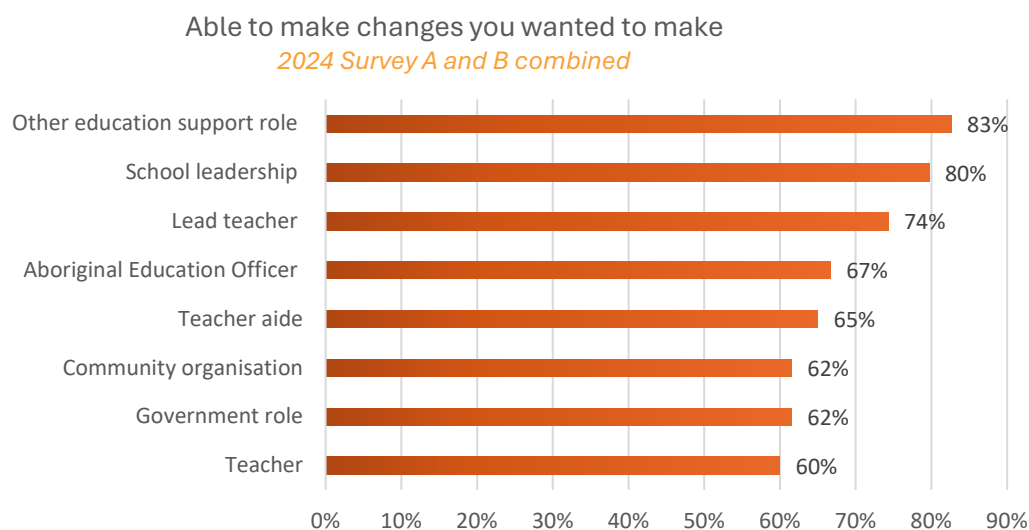

The knowledge which I engaged with at a deep level was the high expectations relationship content as well as complex problems. Engaging with the complexity of these means I am much more grounded when coming up with solutions and motivated to come up with many solutions rather than one fix as well as maintaining HER with colleagues similar to students alike.

Head of Year, NSW

As might be expected, respondents in leadership positions were more likely to report that they had been able to make changes in the workplace (see graph below).

Survey A 2024

87%

of respondents
had made ongoing changes to the way they ensured high expectations in the classroom

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Able to make changes you wanted to make
2024 Survey A and B combined

Role	Percentage
Other education support role	83%
School leadership	80%
Lead teacher	74%
Aboriginal Education Officer	67%
Teacher aide	65%
Community organisation	62%
Government role	62%
Teacher	60%

Changes to practice

In 2024, Survey A, 96% of respondents had made some level of change to their teaching practice. For 70% of respondents this change was ongoing.

The graph below shows how those who have been in the teaching profession for five years or less are the most likely to have made ongoing changes to teaching practice (84%).

It [the SSLP] really made me stop and think about ways to change my and others' behaviours and attitudes towards teaching and learning.

Assistant Principal, NSW

96%
of respondents
had made some level of change to their teaching practice.

70%
of respondents
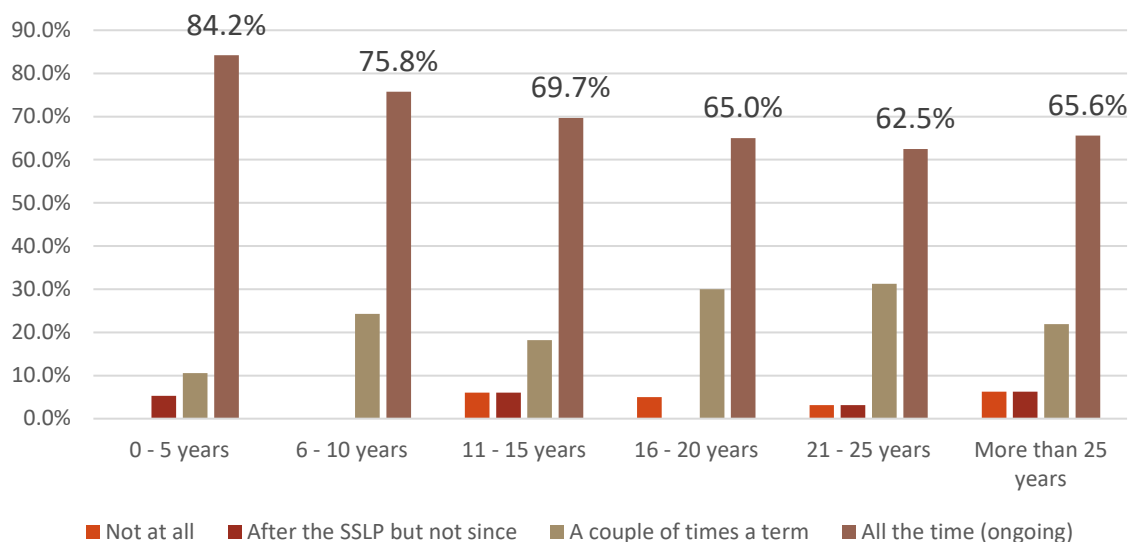changed their teaching practice 'all the time'.

84%
of respondents
who have been teaching for 5 years or less
changed their teaching practice 'all the time'.

Your teaching practice
Survey A 2024

Years in education profession

Legend: Not at all · After the SSLP but not since · A couple of times a term · All the time (ongoing)

Bar values (All the time (ongoing)):
- 0 - 5 years: 84.2%
- 6 - 10 years: 75.8%
- 11 - 15 years: 69.7%
- 16 - 20 years: 65.0%
- 21 - 25 years: 62.5%
- More than 25 years: 65.6%

The graph below shows that a majority of responses to the question, *as a result of attending the SSLP, did you change ... (leadership, classroom practice, etc.)* describe ongoing changes. The greatest change to teaching practice is the way high expectations are promoted.

I feel I have always had high expectations of students however it was how to maintain this through relationships that needed to change for me.
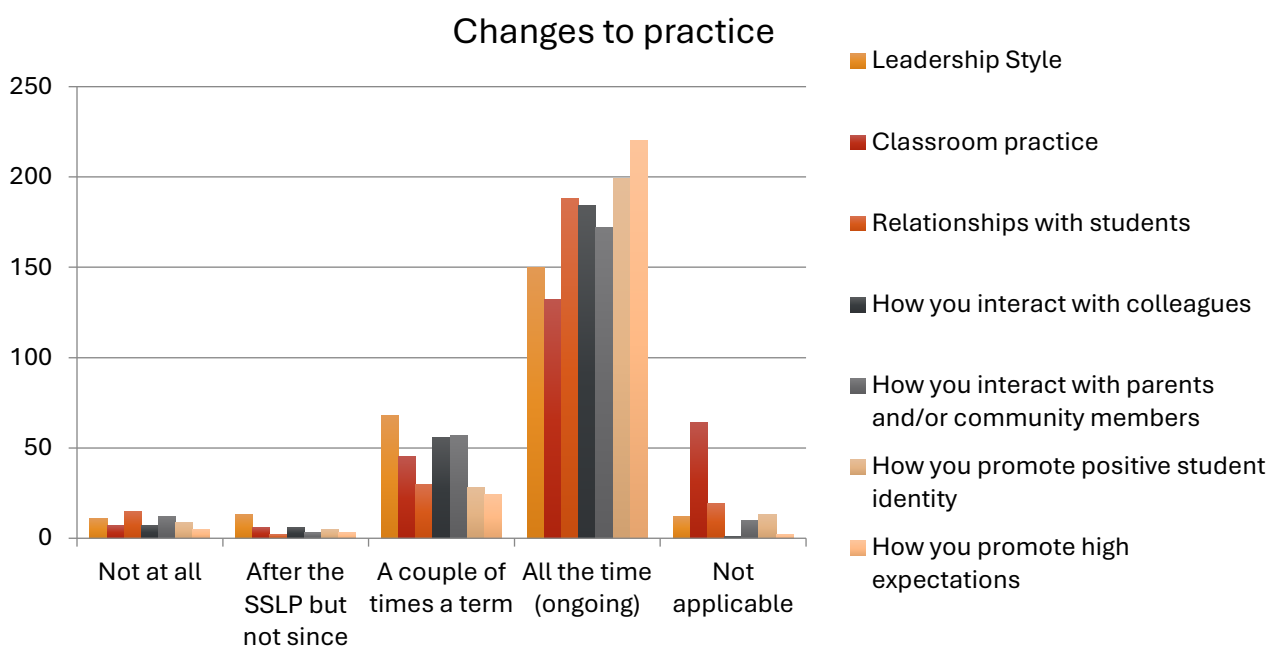
Assistant Principal, NSW

94%

of respondents
who have been teaching for 6-15 years

had made ongoing changes to how they promote high expectations.

Those who have been teaching for 6-15 years were the most likely to have made ongoing changes (94%). However, the differences are small. Even for those who have been in the teaching profession for more than 25 years, over 80% reported making ongoing changes to the way they promote high expectations.

Changes to practice

Legend:
- Leadership Style
- Classroom practice
- Relationships with students
- How you interact with colleagues
- How you interact with parents and/or community members
- How you promote positive student identity
- How you promote high expectations

X-axis categories: Not at all | After the SSLP but not since | A couple of times a term | All the time (ongoing) | Not applicable

Leadership

Survey A 2024

61%

of respondents

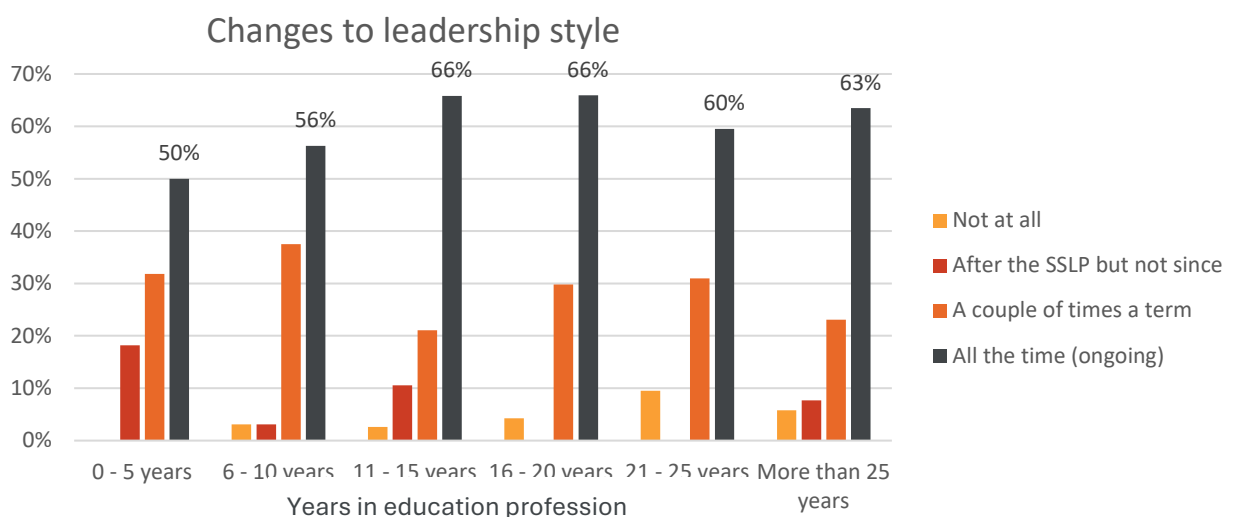had made ongoing changes to their Leadership Practice

Leadership changes

▶ Distributed leadership

▶ Encouraging others

▶ Motivating staff

▶ Conversations on difficult topics

▶ Greater listening

▶ Consistent language and expectations

From Survey A in 2024, 61% of respondents had made ongoing changes to their leadership with those in the middle management years most likely to have made changes (66%).

Respondents describe how the changes they have made in the workplace often begin with personal reflections on assumptions, preconceived ideas and unconscious bias. Respondents also described holding and modelling high expectations of self.

Since my stronger smarter journey I have been given the confidence to challenge people's perspectives when dealing with staff. I have implemented numerous Indigenous programs at my school. Through this I have been able to give our Indigenous students a voice that is heard and respected.

Aboriginal Education Worker, NSW

Changes to leadership style

Legend:
- Not at all
- After the SSLP but not since
- A couple of times a term
- All the time (ongoing)

X-axis: Years in education profession — 0 - 5 years, 6 - 10 years, 11 - 15 years, 16 - 20 years, 21 - 25 years, More than 25 years

Labels above "All the time (ongoing)" bars: 50%, 56%, 66%, 66%, 60%, 63%

Colleagues

For many SSLP/SSJP alumni, their Workplace Challenge begins with working with colleagues, either using Stronger Smarter tools to increase staff collaboration, or to disseminate the strength-based strategies of the Stronger Smarter Approach.

Survey A 2024

72%

of respondents

had made ongoing changes to the way they interacted with their colleagues.

Overall, 72% of respondents in Survey A had made ongoing changes to the way they interact with colleagues. The graph below

shows that this was similar across years in the teaching profession.

An outcome for many respondents was greater staff collegiality. This meant that people were more open to share, that there were team understandings of high expectations and strength-based approaches.

Teams were reflecting on roles and responsibilities, and there was a change in language and motivations. As staff got to know each other better, there was more empathy, less conflict, increased moral, more equality and respect, and more energy in the workplace. The shared ideas and better understandings were resulting in better long term planning. One Alumni described, '*More staff coming to the staffroom to chat - not just heat their food and go again*'.

Interactions with colleagues
Survey A 2024

Legend:
- Not at all
- After the SSLP but not since
- A couple of times a term
- All the time (ongoing)

Values for "All the time (ongoing)": 0 - 5 years: 63%, 6 - 10 years: 71%, 11 - 15 years: 78%, 16 - 20 years: 71%, 21 - 25 years: 72%, More than 25 years: 75%

X-axis: Years in education profession
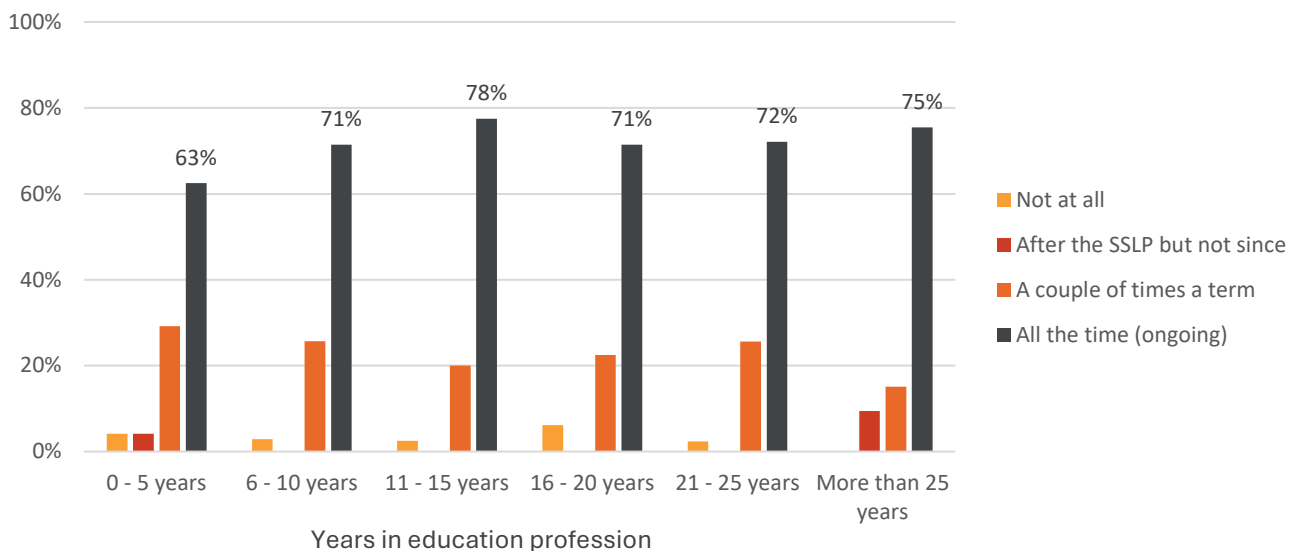
The Stronger Smarter Approach describes how the three Spheres of Personal, School and Community work together to bring improved outcomes for students. The work with staff to build strength-based approaches and shared language around high expectations then flows into the Community and School spheres.

The relationships I have with others and their willingness to adopt new things. We fully appreciate the circle of leadership instead of the triangle. High expectations relationships underpin all we do.

Relieving Principal, NSW

This is the starting point to build the quality learning environments that engage and support students in their learning. One respondent explained that an aligned team meant they could then create a safe environment for students.

Challenging deficit has been one of the most critical workplace practices we have undertaken.

Principal, NSW

Colleagues - Actions

- ▶ High-expectations relationships to build staff collegiality.
- ▶ Building strong networks, making new connections.
- ▶ Reflection on leadership roles and understanding the perspectives of others.
- ▶ Team understandings of assumptions, high expectations and strength-based approaches.
- ▶ Staff check ins.

Colleagues - Outcomes

- ▶ Increased staff collegiality with shared understandings of high expectations and strength-based approaches.
- ▶ More empathy, increased morale, more energy in the workplace.
- ▶ Improved wellbeing, feeling valued and heard.
- ▶ More equality and respect.
- ▶ Greater confidence to share ideas.
- ▶ Broader understanding of Aboriginal perspectives and how to embed them in the curriculum.

Some respondents talked specifically about building relationships with colleagues. One Teacher Aide (see adjacent quote box) described the importance of building high-expectations relationships with her teachers to create a positive working culture.

With this in place she was able to suggest changes to bring First Nations perspectives into the classroom. She said, "*I don't think any of this would have been possible if I had not worked on those Higher Expectation Relationships first - if anyone wants to change the culture of their relationships in the workplace - and the culture of their workplace - then that the one thing to start with - that is where the changes stem from*.

First Nations perspectives

Aim:

My workplace challenge was to work with my teachers to assist then to embed First Nations Perspectives into curriculum.

How:

I worked on building Higher Expectation Relationships with my work colleagues. I understood that in order to bring about even the smallest of changes there needs to be a solid working relationship.

Outcomes:

I then asked my teachers could I show them how we could take a unit that was being taught in the classroom and include First Nations Perspectives into part of it. I did up my own slideshow and brought in my own resources.

Many non-Indigenous teachers are scared/reluctant to put First Nations content and perspectives into their curriculum - however I wanted to show that if a Teacher Aide / school officer can do it then they can too
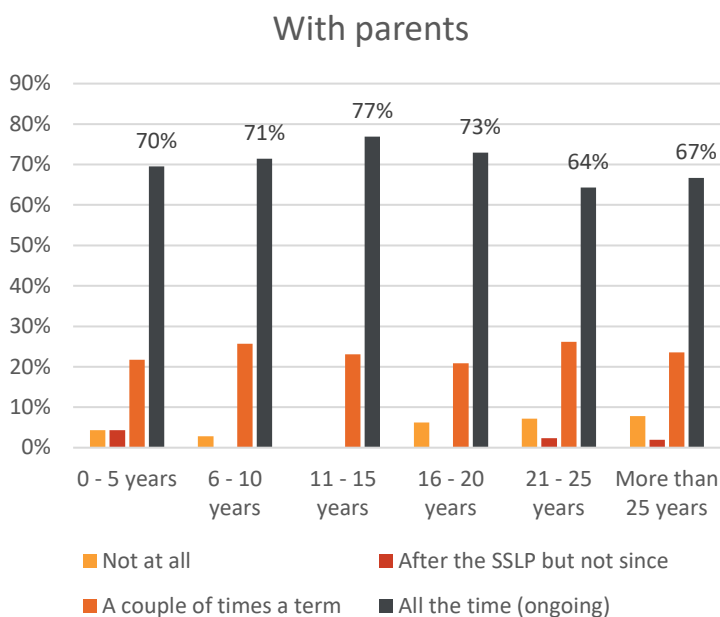
Teacher Aide, QLD

Community

In combined data from all five surveys, 78% of respondents had made ongoing changes to the way they interact with parents after attending the SSLP/SSJP.

The graph below shows that this is higher for early and middle career educators.

Combined Census data 2016 - 2024

78%
of respondents

had made ongoing changes to the way they interacted with parents.

With parents

Legend:
- Not at all
- After the SSLP but not since
- A couple of times a term
- All the time (ongoing)

Community - Actions

▶ Staff developing personal knowledge of Indigenous culture, and local history.

▶ Setting up a proactive First Nations team or increasing the number of staff in the team.

▶ More proactive approaches to connect with families

▶ Listening to the community.

▶ Staff placing greater value on Indigenous ways of working.

Community - Outcomes

▶ Community more comfortable, greater pride, more trust, strengthened sense of belonging.

▶ Greater engagement of voices of community, feeling that their voice is heard.

▶ Parents coming to the school who haven't been before.

▶ Greater involvement in events such as NAIDOC week, community events and cultural workshops

▶ Deepened participation in decision making and shaping the school vision.

▶ Conversations and more powerful interactions.

In the 2024 surveys, respondents described being more proactive, listening to the community and setting up spaces for greater community involvement. They believed that families were feeling more comfortable coming into the school, with greater pride and a strengthened sense of belonging.

For some success is the more traditional view of community engagement of more parents coming to the school, or greater community involvement in events such as NAIDOC week. Respondents described changes in the way they interact with parents, with greater confidence from staff to have conversations and raise high expectations.

The strategies I gained from the workshops have been so valuable. I have been able to connect more effectively with parents, and they are more willing to talk to me. As a result we have been able to work together, to assist my students to settle into the school environment.

Teacher, NSW

Others described deepened participation and greater and more powerful interactions with community, including greater involvement in decision making. They described parents and community more open to sharing information, feeling that they were heard, and understanding their right roles and responsibilities to have a say for their children in the education system.

Deep Listening

Aim:

Educators to be vulnerable enough to be accountable for their previous understandings and be brave to take in change through strength based strategies and high expectations both with colleagues and the children.

How:

Slowing down, deep listening, purposeful structured yarns, being in circle for meetings, practicing Acknowledgement of Country to become confident in saying it with children and also in professional meetings. We have also taken on exploring Indigenous frameworks and built positive relationships with community to support our ideas and strategies learnt through Stronger Smarter.

Outcomes:

Positive relationships with Community. An understanding between the team about high expectations and strength based approaches for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Happier children who feel heard, seen and valued.

Preschool Teacher, NSW

In remote schools, capacity building of local educators is essential in ensuring sustainability. One remote school in WA described how this has been a focus over time supporting local Aboriginal educators to gain teaching degrees.

Another remote school used strength-based practices to connect with the local community to run forums and yarning circles to help understand the community's expectations of the school and to discuss student behaviour.

Student engagement and behaviour is so much better. I have also had a parent come in and meet on cultural aspects we can add into her child's learning which is great that community want to come in.

Teacher, NSW

Empowering local educators

Aim:

We have provided a strong base for our remote community school to work towards a sustainable future by capacity building the local Aboriginal educators and community members.

How:

We believe in empowering local Aboriginal educators and community members to provide the school with direction. We listen, we hear, we act

Outcomes:

We are building a strong base for the future. Data suggests we are on the right track. We have the trust of our community which is an extremely powerful motivator.

Principal, Remote WA

Learning Environments

> *I am creating a classroom where students can reach their full potential in a classroom that is strong and has a vision and they can learn to the best of their ability knowing that they can.*
>
> **Teacher, NSW**

When SSLP/SSJP alumni change their classroom practice, the purpose is to create a classroom environment where students are inspired and empowered to reach their full potential. One respondent described the aim to create a high performing school where all students demonstrate improvement.

Supportive Learning Environments

When SSLP/SSJP alumni change their classroom practice, the purpose is to create a classroom environment where students are inspired and empowered to reach their full potential. Respondents describe this as a supportive and culturally safe environment. In this space students know their teacher believes in them and holds high expectations for them. Students understand the value in coming to school every day, and have high expectations for themselves, believing that they can achieve anything they want in life.

Culturally safe learning environment

Aim:

We wanted to create a learning environment that was culturally safe and responsive.

How:

The importance of listening and seeing teachers around us. Started with a NAIDOC Week some years ago.

Outcomes:

We are still on this journey, as it is dynamic and fluid. Slowly and over time our celebrations have grown. One community family came to our first NAIDOC celebration. Now we have 30, 40, 50 community members attending. Our primary school has growing friendship and trust with the local community. Friends, Partners, a learning family.

Senior Teacher, NSW

Learning environment – actions

▶ Whole school approach with high expectations school cultures that support student connection and growth.

▶ Yarning circles and check ins and High-Expectations Relationships strategies.

▶ Opportunities for students to be involved in cultural activities or engage with Indigenous leaders.

▶ Better conversations with students.

▶ Culturally safe classrooms.

▶ Embedding Indigenous Knowledges and culture into everyday learning.

Respondents described being more explicit about high expectations, setting boundaries, and guiding students to see high achievement as reachable. Respondents were clear, however, that this was accompanied by targeted support. This involved understanding students better and catering for students as individuals. Respondents described being mindful of each person's story, looking at the whole student, and having more compassion. One respondent described a change from making excuses for students to developing strategies to understand and overcome barriers student success.

There was also greater priority placed on student wellbeing and creating space for students to share and build respect for each other in the classroom. One respondent described how setting up

agreed practices and classroom culture resulted in a strong culture of mutual care

Strengthening identity

Aim:

My mission was to create opportunities for my students to strengthen their identities through a variety of Stronger Smarter Programs.

How:

I used my leadership to build strength-based teams, to lead many Cultural Programs across the school. I led Stronger Smarter Staff meetings to build the cultural capacity of my colleagues, which in turn built culturally safe classrooms. I took the time to build relationships with community, through Yarn-ups, Cultural celebrations, which then they drew on their strengths, abilities and knowledge.

Outcomes:

Our students were Strong, Loud and Proud. Students were in class learning, attendance was growing, and the relationships among staff was positive.

Teacher, NSW

Respondents described outcomes as improved student confidence and expectations of themselves, setting learning goals, and instilling an 'I can do this' attitude. This resulted in improved student behaviours.

The table to the right shows the outcomes reported in terms of changes to learning environments.

Developing high expectations relationships with my students in the classroom, I believe has resulted in an improvement in respect and accountability. The changes I have seen in my classroom can be described as students having more of a sense of ownership and a voice over their learning. They take responsibility and are accountable for their actions and also know what is expected from them. Trust is stronger.

Teacher, NSW

High Expectations

- Strength-based language
- More conscious of pre-conceived ideas, unconscious bias and deficit thinking
- Modelling high expectations of self
- Maintaining high expectations through relationships

Embedding IK

- More authentic approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories
- Teaching the history of the local area
- Moving away from tokenism
- Embedding culture into everyday practice

High-Expectations Relationships

- Firm and Fair in the classroom
- Listening to students
- Encouraging students to build respectful relationships
- Taking time to understand student backgrounds and build the emotional bank account
- Greater priority of wellbeing
- Compassion – listening and reacting with understanding

Strength-based processes

- Building on previous knowledge
- Understanding the 'backpack' and how it can impact on application to work
- Looking at the whole student
- Students having more ownership and voice in learning
- Students taking responsibility for actions

Relationships with Students

When respondents described their outcomes in terms of the changes they have made to the learning environment, these overwhelmingly relate to building High-Expectations Relationships.

In Survey A, 80% of respondents had made ongoing changes to the way they build relationships with their students.

Survey A 2024

93%
of respondents

had made some level of change to the way they build relationships with students

80%
of respondents

said they change to the way they build relationships with students was 'all the time (ongoing).'

82%
of respondents

had made ongoing changes to the way they built positive student identity in the classroom

Building Relationships

Aim:

To have a class full of Black students who understand the value in coming to school every day and who know they can achieve anything they want to in life because they have a Black teacher who believes in them and understands them.

How:

We sit in circle at the start of each day to listen and connect with one another which has created strong relationships. We talk about how deadly it is to be Aboriginal and know that we have to work harder to achieve our goals but know that we achieve the same greatness that our ancestors have.

Outcomes:

I have the highest attendance rate in my classroom and barely have any students leaving my class or not completing their class work anymore. Students are working hard and enjoy being in our classroom.

Teacher, Remote QLD

Respondents described a school culture that rejects deficit talk and promotes the idea that all students can learn. This involved allocating time to building relationships such as check-in Circles in the classroom or more time allocated to PLP meetings, as well as creating physical spaces such as Yarning Circles.

Respondents described how strength-focused conversations changed the dialogue around student behaviour. Student behaviour improved when there were better teacher-student relationships and students had higher expectations of themselves.

One respondent described how they had changed their practice with regard to monitoring attendance so that it was more about relationships and personalised assistance. Another said they spent more time with students and families to discuss factors that influence student success.

Changes to relationships with students
Survey A 2024
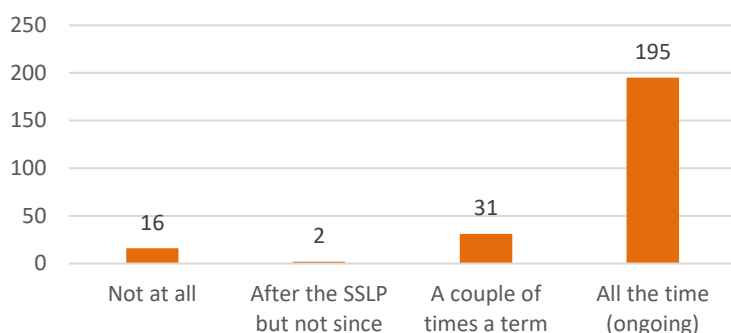
High-Expectations Relationships

Aim:

Building HER across curriculum areas to foster the embedding of First Nations Perspectives in curriculum content and delivery.

How:

Building HER became part of our Professional Development Planning for all staff. We undertook an audit to ascertain the practices in place at our school, where there was room for improvement and how we could go about this. Discussion was held in circle with all participants input valued.

Outcomes:

Engagement with learning resources produced by First Nations authors and educators. Use of narrative in science tasks, Yarning Circles in Religion classes, Yarning Circles with Elders, planting of native plant garden, murals.

Curriculum Leader, QLD

Curriculum

Respondents talked about curriculum changes with more opportunities for students to be involved in cultural activities, often led by local community members. There was a greater overall embedding of cultural elements and Indigenous learning resources in the curriculum. One school described how they had increased Aboriginal Studies subjects and language subjects. One respondent talked about developing a series of activities over a number of years. Another talked about programs to mentor students while developing and maintaining their culture.

I think it has made an impact in the expectations regarding the students. Teachers are more aware of the students home lives which has altered how they engage with students improving relationships and some behaviours.

Aboriginal Education Officer, NSW

A number of respondents reported that there were better understandings and broader awareness of Aboriginal perspectives. One respondent described how teachers were more willing to ask questions and ask for coaching and advice in relation to embedding First Nations perspectives. Others reported that staff had been involved in Professional Learning on country, or that they had a better understanding of local culture and history.

Sense of belonging

Aim:

I wanted a stronger sense of belonging for our students. I wanted a strong focus on supporting our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to succeed and wanted more opportunity for schooling to be inclusive.

How:

We made it happen with a dedicated team around Aboriginal Education. We worked hard to get Aboriginal Studies up, so it was in Yr 12 and Yr 9 and Yr 10 and students knew there was a priority on content.

Outcomes:

We now teach Broader Bundjalung as the language of choice at school and that has been really significant in ensuring language and culture has been dominant.

We are planning on offering Aboriginal Languages as an elective next year. Also doing activities across the years for NAIDOC week and Reconciliation Week

Teacher, Regional NSW

Improving student engagement and achievement

Over all surveys – 2016 - 2024

86%
of respondents

have made ongoing changes to the way they interact with students in the classroom and build positive student identity and high expectations.

The combined data over all five surveys, shows that 86% of respondents had made ongoing changes to how they interacted with students in the classroom.

As one teacher explained, taking the time to work on relationships and values with the class resulted in increased engagement and confidence, which saved time in the long term.

> *I have placed a greater focus at the start of a term/year to purely work on relationships and values in class. This made a huge increase in the class engagement and their confidence to do different things. It saved hours in the long term because the environment was safe and enjoyable.*
>
> **Teacher, QLD**

Respondents describe how student engagement and achievement is linked to a classroom environment with high expectations together with targeted support. This is only possible when teachers build High-Expectations Relationships.

Student engagement linked to:

▶ Teachers who believe in them and guide them to see high achievement as reachable.

▶ Classroom relationships – teachers who know their story.

▶ Explicit high expectations together with targeted support.

▶ Safe learning environment with respectful classroom culture.

▶ IK embedded in the curriculum with value placed on Indigenous ways of learning.

Whole school culture where staff

▶ value strengths, relationships and team approach

▶ hold high expectations of self, and are open to change

▶ work together towards collective goals

▶ hold shared views of high expectations

▶ nurture High-Expectations Relationships with parents and community

▶ develop their knowledge of local Indigenous culture.

The classroom environment is influenced by the whole school culture, where staff value strengths and relationships and work together towards collective goals.

When these are in place, respondents reported improved student engagement and performance in classrooms, with students more passionate about their work and more students ready to learn. Alumni also reported students feeling happier, heard, seen and valued.

Students had a greater connection to culture and were feeling proud of who they are and what they achieved at school. There was a greater sense of trust, cultural safety, and more respectful relationships between staff and students. These changes were also visible as improvements in behaviour and attendance.

We have seen better connections between staff and students. Staff that follow the key elements of high- expectations relationships continue to see a decline in negative behaviour and better connection and completion of work.

Teacher, NSW

Student Outcomes

▶ Improved behaviour, attendance, engagement and performance.

▶ Improved respect and accountability.

▶ Improved cohesion and inclusion. Happier students, sense of trust, respectful relationships

▶ Students more ready to learn and passionate about their work.

▶ Students more motivated to 'have a go' and confident that they 'can do it'.

▶ Greater ownership of learning, greater resilience.

▶ Students proud of who they are, with greater connection to culture.

▶ Greater sense of identity and cultural pride.

▶ Greater sense of belonging at school.

▶ Students feeling seen and valued.

▶ Indigenous students taking on leadership in the school.

Further information

Stronger Smarter Approach

The following documents provide further information about the Stronger Smarter Approach.

Sarra, C., Spillman, D., Jackson, C., Davis, J., & Bray, J. (2020). High-Expectations Relationships: A Foundation for Enacting High Expectations in all Australian schools. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education.* 49(1), pp32-45. https://ajie.atsis.uq.edu.au/ajie/article/view/255

Stronger Smarter Institute (2014). *High-Expectations Relationships. A Foundation for Quality Learning Environments in all Australian Schools*. Stronger Smarter Institute Limited Position Paper. High-Expectations Relationships | Stronger Smarter

Stronger Smarter Institute (2020). *Stronger Smarter: A strength-based approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.* Strength-Based Approaches | Stronger Smarter

Stronger Smarter Institute Limited (2020). A mesh of High-Expectations Relationships across transitions in the Early Years. Stronger Smarter Institute Limited Position Paper. Jarjums Position Paper | Stronger Smarter

Stronger Smarter Institute (2020). *When challenged, how do you respond? Educators taking Responsibility for Change.* Responsibility for Change | Stronger Smarter

Earlier Census Reports

Previous Census Reports are on the Stronger Smarter Institute website at: https://strongersmarter.com.au/stronger-smarter-reports/