



Supporting Culturally Responsive Schools

School communities become empowered when they share leadership, voice, and vision – co-creating culturally responsive schools that reflect local strengths, support student success, and celebrate identity, culture and belonging.

The development and design of the Stronger Smarter Institute's First Nations Community Empowerment Framework, and the whole school co-design process discussed in this document were supported by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) through The Stronger Smarter Approach - How to Sustain Community Empowerment project.

Acknowledgement for images:

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About us

The Stronger Smarter Institute is a First Nations-led organisation and a national leader in transforming educational outcomes for First Nations students.

With a focus on empowering both communities and educators, the Institute supports the development of culturally responsive practices that foster positive identities, excellence, and equity.

Grounded in the Stronger Smarter Approach, the Institute equips educators across Australia to lead with cultural integrity, build high-expectations relationships, and challenge deficit thinking. Through professional learning programs, research, and advocacy, we work alongside schools and communities as 'partners

in change' to create inclusive, empowering learning environments where every child feels safe, valued, and capable of success.

Across the country, we've seen strong learning communities grow as whole school teams come together to drive transformation,

build authentic relationships with students, families, and local communities, and establish quality environments for learning. The Stronger Smarter Institute continues to lead the way in educational reform that honours culture, promotes excellence, and inspires hope.

EMPOWERING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE



What if we flipped the script?

What does success in schooling really mean for First Nations students?

Current measures that focus narrowly on test scores and employment fail to reflect the broader aspirations of First Nations families who value cultural identity, community contribution, and holistic wellbeing alongside academic achievement.

There is a mismatch between what schools offer and what communities value.

What if we flipped the script?

Instead of asking whether students are 'school ready', we could ask whether schools are ready to support all students. Instead of measuring gaps in literacy and numeracy, we could measure how well schools nurture belonging, wellbeing, and cultural identity.

This shift moves the focus from student 'deficits' to school

responsibility. It challenges the assumption that First Nations students lack aspiration and instead highlights the institutional and relational barriers that hinder engagement.

If schools are to make this change - to redefine success and embed culture, language and local knowledge into the heart of schooling - it will take something more than community consultation. Aligning schools with community values needs deep engagement with community voices.

If schools can really listen to the aspirations of First Nations communities and reflect the values of the communities they serve, they become places of empowerment, identity, and hope.

The Stronger Smarter Institute offers a range of courses and partnership opportunities to support schools and communities to flip the script.

ALIGNING SCHOOLS WITH COMMUNITY
VALUES NEEDS DEEP ENGAGEMENT
WITH COMMUNITY VOICES



Rethinking Community Engagement

Too often, community engagement is framed through a deficit lens, where schools seek to change communities rather than reflect their values.

The Stronger Smarter Approach challenges this by placing communities at the centre of decision-making. True engagement means genuine partnerships grounded in respect, trust, and shared purpose, where schools engage with First Nations voices and shift toward community visions.

From engagement to empowerment

Community empowerment is about more than participation – it's about shifting power. Schools become stronger when they embed community expertise into planning, governance, and curriculum. This shift creates culturally safe spaces where identity, learning, and leadership thrive together.

Sustainable change through shared leadership

Schools play a vital role as community hubs, connecting learning with local life. When schools and communities co-design strategies for improvement, education becomes more relevant and responsive to local contexts. This collaborative approach anchors school values and improvement processes in the community itself to ensure long-term sustainability.

The Stronger Smarter Institute supports schools to move beyond consultation and toward shared leadership, helping create the conditions for community confidence and capability.



CREATING CULTURALLY SAFE SPACES
WHERE IDENTITY, LEARNING, AND
LEADERSHIP THRIVE TOGETHER

First Nations Community Empowerment Framework

Reimagining education through community voice and shared leadership

The Stronger Smarter First Nations Community Empowerment Framework is a bold invitation to reimagine education through the lens of shared leadership, cultural strength, and community voice.

The Framework supports schools and communities to walk together in partnership, with shared decision-making and collective responsibility for student success. The Framework recognises that First Nations families, Elders, and local leaders hold the wisdom, knowledge, and aspirations needed to shape meaningful and relevant schooling. It shifts the focus from

doing things to communities to working with them.

The Framework shows how the Stronger Smarter Approach can be enacted by bringing together the Personal, School, and Community Spheres into a shared space of innovation and creation. Rather than expecting communities to adapt to school systems, it encourages schools to shift toward the Community Sphere, aligning with local values and aspirations.

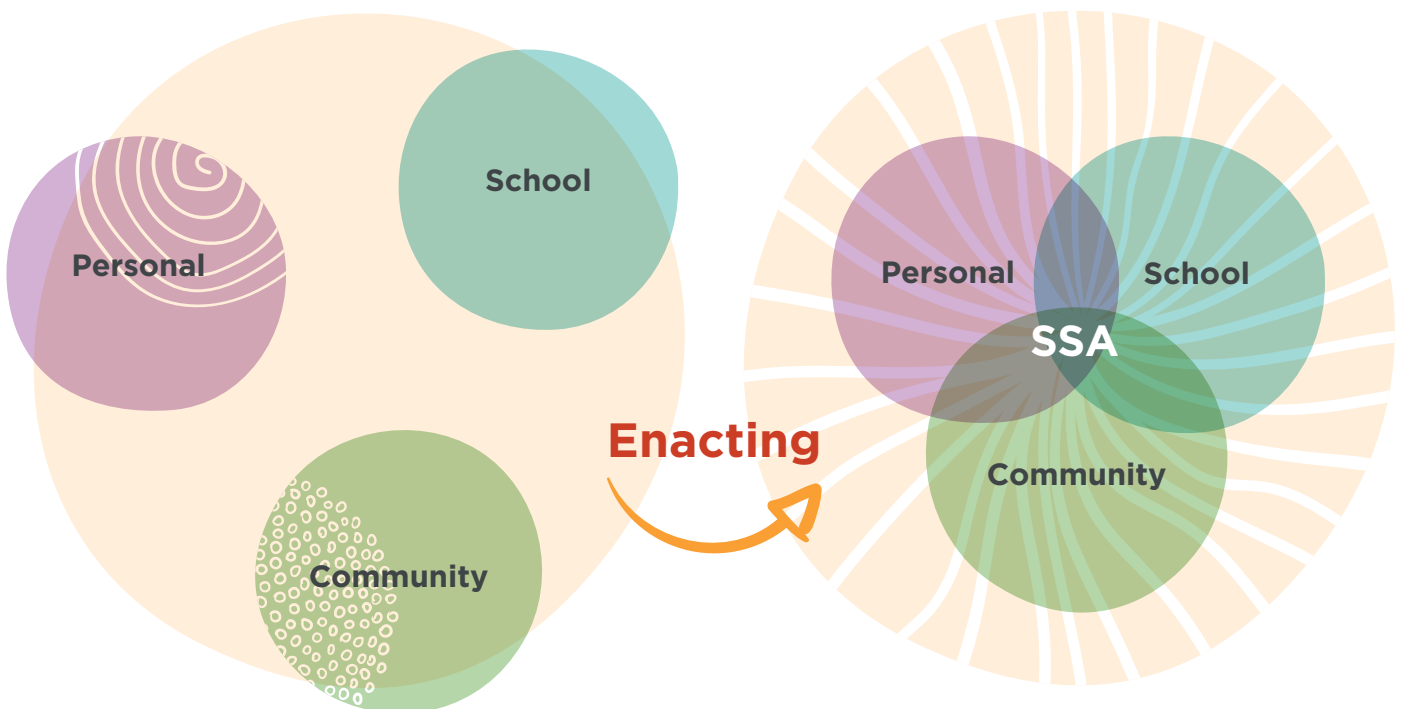
This approach fosters trust, builds High-Expectations Relationships, and embeds community voices in school planning, governance,

and everyday practice. It's about transforming relationships, challenging systemic inequities, and shifting the balance of power. Success requires deep cultural responsiveness, authentic partnerships, and a commitment to listening and learning from community voices.



Take me to:
**COMMUNITY
EMPOWERMENT
FRAMEWORK**

Figure 1: The Stronger Smarter Spheres



With High-Expectations Relationships, the spheres of the personal, school and community come together as the Stronger Smarter Approach in a connecting space of innovation and creation.

High-Expectations Relationships

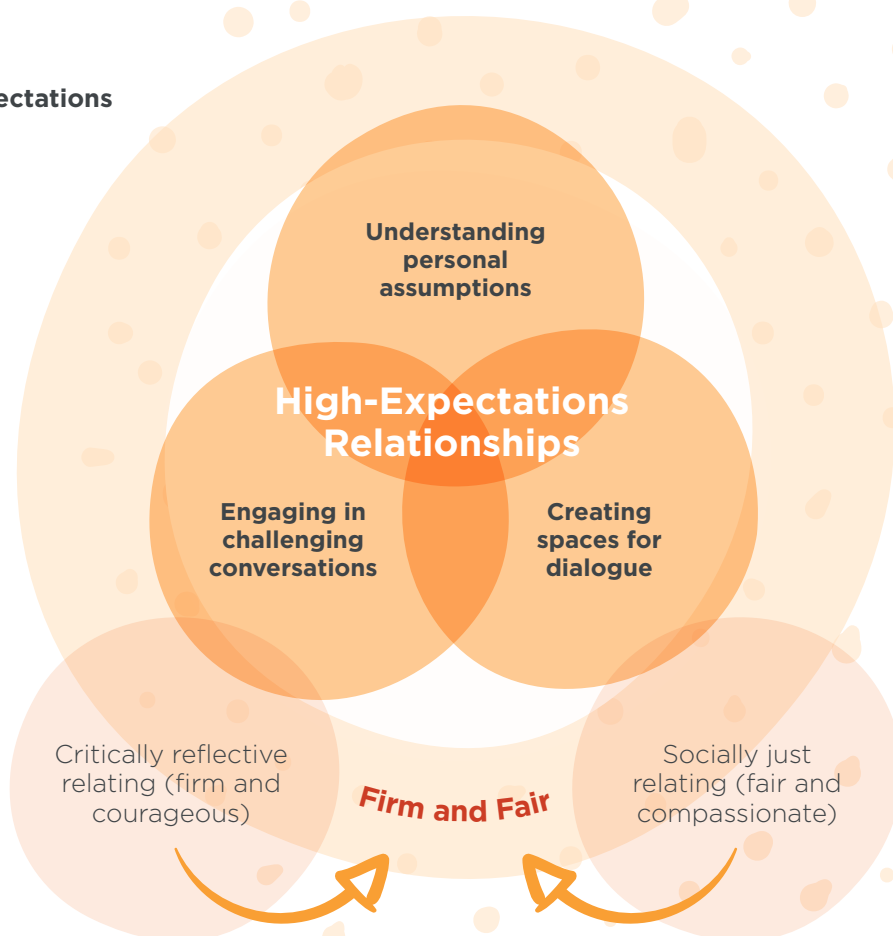
The foundation for culturally safe, inclusive and high-performing school communities.

High-Expectations Relationships underpin every aspect of the First Nations Community Empowerment Framework – from leadership and teaching to community partnerships and co-design. These relationships are built across the whole school community. They are everyone's responsibility.

Balancing 'firm' and 'fair' is key to building trust. Being 'firm' means having the courage to hold challenging conversations, while being 'fair' means approaching those conversations with compassion and recognising the strengths each person

brings. This balance creates safe, respectful spaces where power is shared, and expectations are co-created. High-Expectations Relationships take time and patience, but they are essential to creating culturally safe, inclusive, and high-performing school communities.

Figure 2: High-Expectations Relationships



A co-design framework

Moving from consultation to genuine partnership and community-led change.

As schools rethink how they engage with communities, co-design offers a powerful shift from consultation to true collaboration. A co-design process creates space for genuine partnership, where families, carers, and community members actively shape school priorities and practices.

Our Co-design framework is a collaborative journey that takes time and relies on cultural safety and authentic relationships. Grounded in the Stronger Smarter Approach and High-Expectations Relationships, it moves schools from top-down decision-making to community-led innovation, fostering sustainable change and stronger connections.

Together, schools and communities develop shared visions and locally tailored strategies to improve student

engagement, attendance, and outcomes. This process builds trust, cultural safety, and collective ownership, ensuring all voices are heard and valued.

The four Domains outlined in the framework are not a linear process but interconnected areas of focus that can overlap and evolve together. This flexible approach allows actions across all Domains to inform and strengthen each other as part of a dynamic, collaborative journey.

COMMUNITY-LED INNOVATION,
FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE CHANGE
AND STRONGER CONNECTIONS



Figure 3: Co-design Framework



Domain 1

Culturally Responsive School

To commence any co-design process, the school sets the groundwork by developing a shared understanding of what a culturally responsive school looks like in the local context.

This involves:

- Reflecting on current practices, strengths, and areas for growth.
- Acknowledging that prior experience may not apply and being willing to unlearn and relearn.
- Improving understanding of the community's social and cultural context (if necessary).
- Building High-Expectations Relationships with students, families, Elders, and local organisations (if not already in place).

Domain 2

Co-design Process

Once the groundwork is in place, the school works to establish a co-design process. Activities here are shaped by the context and insights gathered in Domain 1.

This involves the school:

- Engaging stakeholders to build shared understanding and sustainable buy-in for co-design.
- Creating safe spaces for open and respectful dialogue to support two-way sharing and learning.
- Providing opportunities for community members to understand school planning processes to support their full participation in the process.

Once a co-design team is established, which may include both community members and school staff, the school leadership takes a step back.

The co-design team will then work together to:

- Co-create an agreed social process, documenting values, behaviours, and protocols for working together.
- Design priorities and activities to improve attendance, engagement, and achievement.

The goal is to build a self-sustaining model where the group takes ownership of planning and decision-making, with the school acting as a supportive partner.

Domain 3

Enact Activities

With priorities and strategies agreed upon, the focus shifts to action. The co-design team works with the school in the implementation of activities, ensuring they reflect the shared values and protocols established earlier.

This may involve:

- Embedding agreed strategies into school planning and daily practice.
- Allocating resources and responsibilities collaboratively to maintain shared ownership.
- Establishing clear timelines and processes for monitoring progress and celebrating milestones.
- Maintaining open communication channels so the school and community remain informed and engaged throughout implementation.

The school respects the shift in leadership, recognising this as a true partnership built on equal power and mutual trust. Success is measured not only by outcomes but by the strength of relationships and the sustainability of the process.

Domain 4

Evaluate and Refine

Once one round of implementation has occurred, the school supports the partnership group to lead an ongoing cycle of reflection and improvement.

This involves:

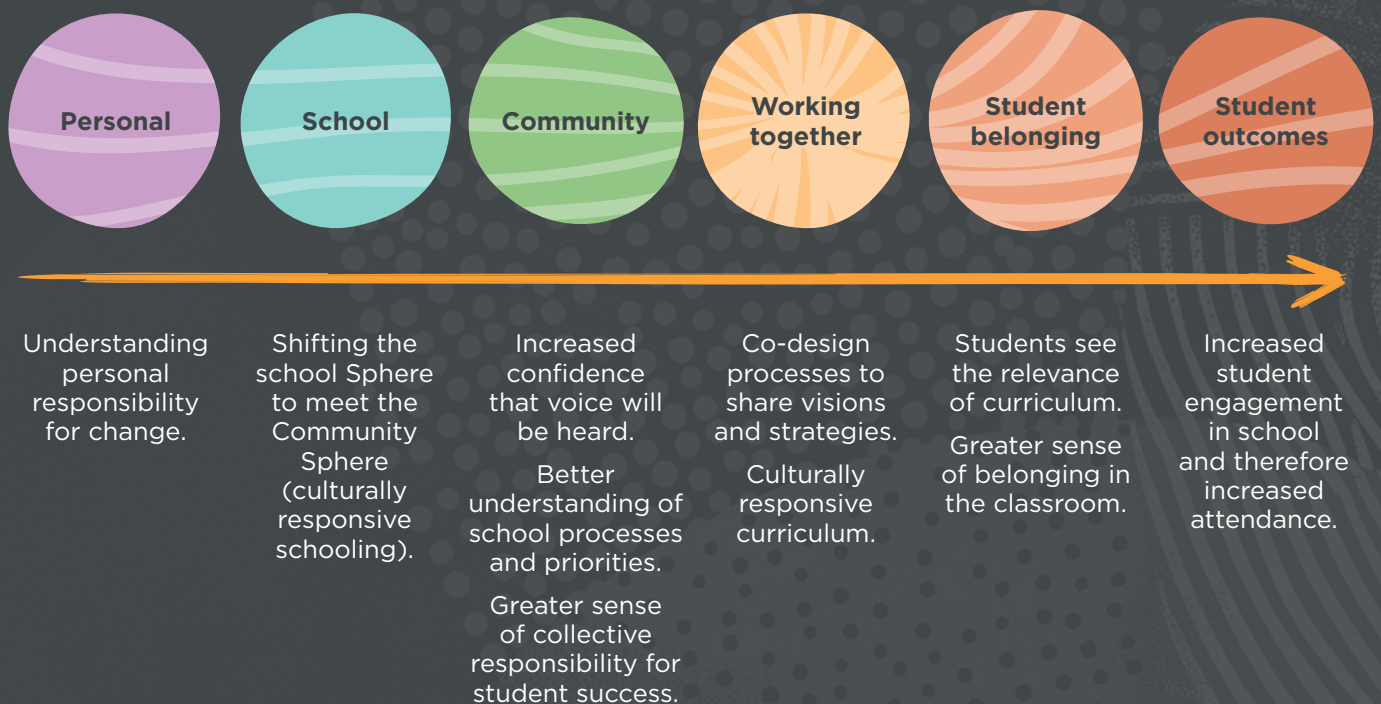
- Reviewing strategies and priorities to assess progress, impact, and areas for refinement.
- Identifying what's working, adapting where needed, and re-implementing improved strategies.
- Designing effective review processes with school support and resources, while respecting group leadership.
- Continuing the shared learning journey to strengthen relationships and outcomes over time.

Start your journey

How can we help you in your journey?

The Institute provides programs and services to support any stage of the journey. We can support you across any of the Spheres, and/or to develop a co-design process.

Figure 4: A strength-based approach to community empowerment



Personal Sphere

- Tools and strategies to enhance teaching in line with the Australian Teacher Standards.
- Reflection on personal values and beliefs to align practice with high expectations for all students and build culturally responsive classrooms.
- High-Expectations Relationships as a foundation for authentic relationships and leadership.

School Sphere

Culturally Responsive Schools

- Design the Stronger Smarter model that works best for the local area.
- Work collaboratively with the whole school community to identify, understand and navigate complex challenges.
- Build community capacity, confidence, and leadership.

Community Sphere

Co-design processes

- Work together to facilitate connections and open up opportunities.
- Build long-term, sustainable relationships and partnerships within whole school communities.
- Embed Stronger Smarter ways of working into the co-design process.
- Run processes in a way that suits local requirements.

Our Programs

For teachers, leaders and communities committed to every child's strong and smart future.

You will experience:

A safe and collaborative space for honest and authentic reflection on personal and professional identity, beliefs, and leadership practices.

Experiential and culturally responsive facilitation that blends practical tools with deep personal insight.

Thoughtful and engaging content delivery with time for meaningful learning and growth.

Group dialogue supported by clear frameworks and processes to foster connection and shared understanding.



The new ways of thinking that we've been invited into are really exciting and I wish that all educators would have an opportunity to do this sooner rather than later.

STRONGER SMARTER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

Participants say our programs are:

Transformational

Encouraging deep self-reflection on identity, values, and beliefs.

Empowering

Building confidence to lead with integrity and challenge assumptions, reigniting passion and purpose.

Practical

Offering tools and frameworks that can be applied in classrooms, schools, and everyday life.

Culturally Responsive

Exploring the impact of social and cultural constructs, especially for First Nations students and communities.

Collaborative

Fostering strong peer connections and collective learning.

Challenging and Insightful

Pushing participants out of their comfort zones to grow personally and professionally.

Supporting Schools



Stronger Smarter Leadership Program

**Empowering educators.
Transforming communities.**

The Stronger Smarter Leadership Program is a transformative professional learning experience that empowers educators to lead with strength, cultural integrity, and high expectations. Grounded in Indigenous Knowledges, the program fosters High-Expectations Relationships and supports educators to build culturally affirming learning environments where all students, and especially First Nations students, can thrive. Through deep reflection on identity, values, and leadership, participants reconnect with their purpose, gain practical strategies for change, and strengthen their commitment to equity and excellence in education.



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STRONGER SMARTER LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

www.strongersmarter.com.au/leadership-programs/



Stronger Smarter Masterclasses

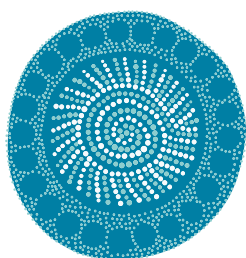
Take your school into the future with the Stronger Smarter Approach.

Stronger Smarter Masterclasses offer targeted professional development for educators and leaders navigating complex challenges in schools and organisations. Building on the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program, each Masterclass deepens understanding through expert-led sessions that blend theory, reflection, and practical strategies. Participants engage in collaborative dialogue, explore new perspectives, and design Action Research projects that strengthen culturally responsive practices and support the development of inclusive, community-connected schools.



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STRONGER SMARTER MASTERCLASSES

www.strongersmarter.com.au/masterclasses/



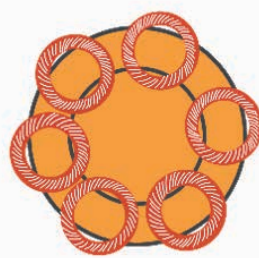
Stronger Smarter Workplaces

Stronger Smarter Workplaces brings the Stronger Smarter Approach into diverse organisational settings, supporting teams to strengthen leadership, cultural capability, and collaboration. Stronger Smarter Workplaces can support schools to audit and strengthen their cultural responsiveness and strengthen relationships with local communities through shared leadership, trust-building, and community empowerment.



Take me to:
STRONGER SMARTER WORKPLACES

www.strongersmarter.com.au/workplaces/



Stronger Smarter Online Courses

Our online learning platform provides access to specialised content supporting schools and communities to enact the Stronger Smarter Approach. Use the courses to introduce staff to the approach and High-Expectations Relationships, or to refresh and consolidate learning after other programs. Modules can be explored at your own pace, as an introduction or to deepen understanding following face-to-face programs.



Take me to:
STRONGER SMARTER ONLINE COURSES

www.strongersmarter.com.au/ssi-virtual/

Supporting Communities

Community-led, strengths-based, and transformative



Partnerships

Building authentic connections for lasting impact

The Stronger Smarter Institute can partner with community organisations, Prescribed Body Corporates (PCBs), Indigenous Land Councils, and Traditional Owner groups to co-create strategies that reflect local priorities across organisations, councils, education departments and schools. Our role is to walk alongside, supporting relationship-building and creating spaces where people can connect, reflect, and explore how they might work together to create meaningful change.



Take me to:
**STRONGER SMARTER
PARTNERSHIPS**

www.strongersmarter.com.au/partnerships/



Having the backing of an Indigenous-led organisation such as the Stronger Smarter Institute was important, and the project is seeing greater incentive from schools to engage with their local community.

TARIBELANG ABORIGINAL CORPORATION
(on partnering to share Taribelang Bunda culture with students)

Programs for Community

We encourage community members and organisations to attend our Stronger Smarter Leadership Program together with their local schools or undertake our online programs.

The Stronger Smarter Workplaces can be tailored to support organisations to navigate dynamic relationships across staff, clients, stakeholders, and local communities and nurture collaborative team cultures.



Contact Us

Contact us to discuss what will work for you.

Visit our website at <https://www.strongersmarter.com.au>

Contact us at enquiries@strongersmarter.com.au or 07 5499 4135

Empowering whole school communities for transformative change



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