Stronger Smarter Institute Response to the Interim report on the Review of the National School Reform Agreement

The Stronger Smarter Institute (SSI) runs professional development programs for teachers, and currently has approximately 5,000 alumni across the country. These alumni include Aboriginal Education workers and other support staff, principals, teachers, education department staff, community members and members of other organisations associated with education. We are in regular contact with our alumni to understand how they implement the Stronger Smarter Approach™ in schools. In responding to this report, we draw on the depth of experience of our program alumni through their written evaluations and through SSI census reports and the expertise of the SSI team.

Section 3: Lifting outcomes for all students

Strength-based approaches

The Stronger Smarter Approach[1] is a strength-based approach, and alumni tell us how important that is in creating a shared language of high expectations, and recognising the strengths that students bring to the classroom. Alumni tell us that curriculum and student support programs work better when they are underpinned by the Stronger Smarter Approach.

SSI would like to see this aspect of recognising existing strengths in school communities and looking for local solutions come through further in the Review.

Information request 3.1 *Programs to support intensive catch up (p.31, p.84)*

SSI agree on the need for programs to support intensive catch up but emphasise the importance of thinking about how these programs are positioned to be grounded in a non-deficit approach and to be culturally responsive. To better support First Nations students, educators are required to recognise the strengths and knowledges of local community and looking at the ways they could be involved, can help to effectively engage students in learning. For example, Community Durithunga which was set up at an urban Brisbane school was co-designed with the community as a culturally safe space for First Nations students. This included a Homework Hub which encouraged a focus on cultural recognition and academic excellence[2].

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[1] Stronger Smarter Institute. (2017). *Implementing the Stronger Smarter Approach.* Stronger Smarter Institute Position Paper. Stronger Smarter Approach | Stronger Smarter

[2] Davis, John & Woods, Annette (2019) Durithunga Boul: A pattern of respectful relationships, reciprocity and socially just literacy education in one urban school. In Rennie, J & Harper, H (Eds.) *Literacy Education and Indigenous Australians: Theory, Research and Practice.* Springer, Singapore, pp. 51-69.

Davis-Warra, J., Dooley, K.T., & Exley, B. E. (2011). Reflecting on the 'Dream Circle'" Urban Indigenous education processes designed for student and community empowerment. *QTU Professional magazine*, 26, 19-21.

Priority equity cohorts

Under the heading *Priority equity cohorts do not capture all students experiencing educational disadvantage* (p.22) students who do not speak Standard Australian English (SAE) as their first language and children in out of home care (OOHC) are specifically mentioned. It should be recognised that for many First Nations children SAE is an additional language or dialect – and often not the second language or dialect. First Nations children are over-represented in OOHC - in June 2020, the number of school-aged children (age 5-17) in care in Australia was 35,717. Of these, 40% were Indigenous—a significant overrepresentation, with 56.3 per 1,000 Indigenous children in care, compared to 5.1 for non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2021).

Information request 3.2. *Priority equity cohorts for the next agreement (p.33).*

School attendance is accepted as fundamental to improving educational outcomes for all students. Absence from school disproportionately impacts on children in out of home care. While there are complex webs of 'out of the school gate' factors contributing to this need exists for schools and education systems to develop expertise in working with children in OOHC. The recent report by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN, 2019: 5, 9, 12) urges the Australian government to address unequal access to services, including through: *affirmative action [for vulnerable groups including] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children [and] children in alternative care" [… to] ensure that children, their families and communities participate in decision-making in order to guarantee an individualized and community-sensitive approach [… and to] invest more in improving education at the early childhood, primary and secondary levels, paying particular attention to […] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children [and] children in alternative care.*

Information request 3.4 *Transparency of funding for students from priority equity cohorts.*

It is reasonable to expect that expenditure from the public purse be open to scrutiny, and that governments and other bodies who have access to the public purse have some expectation that they are accountable for the way in which the public monies are dispersed.(Coopes, 2009:114)[3] It is however important not to repeat the mistakes that have been made in the past where First Nations bodies have been subject to stricter - and unwieldy - accountability requirements than mainstream bodies.

Gerry Hand who was responsible for drafting and implementing the enabling legislation, wrote ten years later that ATSIC was probably subjected to stricter financial accountability requirements than any other department (Hand 1999:19).[4] *Hand was making it very clear that he believed racist assumptions that money was wasted in First Nations affairs had led to the imposition of an unwieldy and unworkable system which then created problems related to onerous accountability expectations* (Coopes 2009:115).

[3] Coopes, R. 2009. *Australian Aboriginal Marginalisation in Policy Making and Education: an aftermath of colonialism.* Lambert Academic Publishing, Kohn.

[4] Hand, G. 1999, 'The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission: A sophisticated working model – a decade of experience', *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration,* vol. 94, pp.17-22.

<u>Information request 3.5</u> *Embedding the perspectives of priority equity cohorts in national education policy and institutions.*

In response to the first question, it is imperative to include representatives of each cohort in all stages of policy development. In response to question 2 if a national Indigenous consultative body on education was to be established, it would need to be self-determined by a national Indigenous led organisation rather than through a government body. It would need to be funded as an independent peak network made up of First Nations educational leaders from Nations across Australia.

<u>Information request 2.2/2</u> (*p.31/ p. 78) Options for enhancing accountability in the next agreement*

SSI noted that throughout the report, the view of who are leaders or experts should be widened. For instance, in Information request 2.2. (2) the list of groups representing school systems who should have effective input into policy formation is missing First Nations community groups as stakeholders in education.

<u>Draft Finding 3.5</u> – Culturally responsive curriculum

SSI agree with the findings that culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies increase inclusion and engagement of First Nations students, and that Indigenous knowledges, First Nations cultures, and how to include, empower and engage students may be poorly understood by teachers and school leadership. Indigenous Knowledges should be at the core of the cross curriculum priority. This cannot be enacted authentically without prioritising voices of First Nations People.

In the recent discussions around a national curriculum[56], it is necessary to ensure that these important findings are not lost. This has implications firstly for how 'quality curriculum' is defined, to ensure that takes a strength-based approach and is inclusive of equity cohorts and in particular First Nations students. Secondly this has implications for ensuring the ongoing professional development so that teachers are upskilled to be able to recognise what culturally responsive quality curriculum looks like, and to build relationships with local communities to co-design place-based curriculum for their schools.

Section 4: Student Wellbeing

<u>Information request 4.1</u> Should there be National Policy Initiatives to improve student wellbeing? Question 2

As discussed in the report (p.22), student wellbeing should be an area of national priority. For First Nations students, wellbeing means ensuring that all approaches are holistic and culturally responsive to diverse nations.

[5] Jensen, B, & Murnane, N. (2022). Reclaim the curriculum. *The Weekend Australian*, 15 Oct 2022.
[6] Hunter, J, Haywood, A, & Parkinson, N. (2022). *Ending the lesson lottery: How to improve curriculum planning in schools*. Grattan Institute

Any initiative to improve student wellbeing needs to be tailored to the local context, grounded in strong and respectful relationships with the community and provide individualised and holistic support that is strength based and solutions focused.

Nine guiding principles were presented in the *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2004-2009.* These principles retained in the 2017-2023 Framework[7] are:

• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is viewed in a holistic context
• The right to self-determination
• The need for cultural understanding
• The impact of history in trauma and loss
• Recognition of human rights
• Impact of racism and stigma
• Recognition of the centrality kinship
• Recognition of cultural diversity
• Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strength.

These principles have been adopted in work by the Telethon Institute[8] and the Healing Foundation[9] in their work involving wellbeing for First Nations children.

Section 5: Supporting teachers

Relationships as a key component of quality teaching and high expectations

<u>Draft Finding 5.1</u> *Improving teacher effectiveness is associated with large lifetime economic benefits for students. (p.135)*

SSI agree on the need to enable quality teaching and for governments to create the time, support and resources for effective teaching (p.2, p.8, p.130). Figure 5.2 (p.132) showing the drivers for teacher quality and quality teaching describes important personal attributes.   The 2016 study by Bahr, *Building quality in teaching and teacher education[10]*, considered that these personal attributes make the difference between a competent teacher and a quality teacher. However, they suggested that a quality teacher must be committed to developing positive working relationships with their students which imbue learners with self-belief.   Bahr suggested that this aspect of developing relationships with students was generally missing from competency frameworks. Likewise, the importance of relationships - particularly relationships with First Nations families and community to develop and maintain trust - is missing from Figure 5.2

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[7] https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/mhsewb-framework_0.pdf

[8] https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/aboriginal-health/working-together-second-edition/working-together-aboriginal-and-wellbeing-2014.pdf

[9] https://healingfoundation.org.au//app/uploads/2020/07/Children_Report_Jun2020_FINAL.pdf

[10] Bahr, N. (2016).   *Building quality in teaching and teacher education*. Australian education review: 61. (Series editor S. Mellor). VIC: Australian Council for Educational Research.

A key component of the Stronger Smarter Approach is quality teacher-student relationships which we describe as High-Expectations Relationships[11]. We believe this should be a key component of any policy or framework describing teacher quality and quality teaching.

High-Expectations Relationships combine the aspect of understanding students and building supportive environments, with setting high expectations for students and encouraging every student to grow (p.95). High-Expectations Relationships are therefore a key component of both addressing the impact of low expectations (e.g., findings on p.95 that issues of low expectations could be addressed through better engagement and communication with students, their families, and their communities), and also building student wellbeing and sense of belonging.

SSI alumni tell us that after completing one of our diverse range of programs one of the things they most frequently change in their teaching practice is to build High-Expectations Relationships with their students. Alumni have shared that this results in better student behaviour and engagement in the classroom which then leads to improved learning. Likewise, community involvement in schooling is enhanced when schools use High-Expectations Relationships as an underlying approach to all their interactions with parents and community.

SSI strongly believe that High-Expectations Relationships should be a clear component of teacher quality and more visible as part of national policy.

Professional development programs

The Stronger Smarter Leadership Program™ (SSLP) provides participants with the opportunity to reflect on their out of awareness assumptions about First Nations people and to move from a deficit position to strength-based approaches incorporating place-based approaches which authentically engage with local Indigenous Knowledge holders including families and community members.

SSI alumni have told us how important SSLP is in terms of shifting thinking towards high expectations and supporting students in all equity groups. As we discussed above, evidence from alumni is that the personal attributes described in Figure 5.2 can be enhanced when teachers use tools from the program to build better relationships with their students.

The average age of teachers is 44 years old as determined by the Queensland College of Teachers. The natural implication of this fact is that a significant proportion of the teaching workforce completed their initial teacher education before compulsory units on First Nations education were introduced. Therefore, it is essential that effective and ongoing professional development is mandated for these teachers and that jurisdictions allocate the funding for this.

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[11] 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. Published online in 2018. First View. doi 10.1017/jie.2018.10

Teaching Workforce

Information request 5.4 – *could deployment and use of teaching assistants and support staff be improved to help reduce teacher workload?*

SSI agree that there is space for national policy and collaboration in taking a strength-based approach to the role of teaching assistants, particularly in the case of Indigenous education workers. Too often Indigenous education workers are expected to be responsible for behaviour management of First Nations students. This ignores the value and expertise they can bring with traditional knowledges as co-teachers in the classroom.

SSI would like to see a national policy initiative around better valuing and supporting local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff

Finding 5.2 *There is a lack of teachers from diverse backgrounds.*

SSI would suggest that in remote communities it is essential to have teachers from the local community and would suggest a national policy to support more First Nations people to become teachers and stay teaching in their local communities.

Section 6 – School Leadership

Draft Finding 6.1 *Improving school leadership can have large impacts on students' learning*

Feedback from Stronger Smarter alumni supports the importance of school leadership in bringing a whole school approach to high expectations and building relationships with students and community. Our alumni feedback shows how important effective PD, such as the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program, can be in supporting staff to become leaders.

Information Request 6.1 *Are there alternative sources of school leaders, including from outside the teaching profession?*

SSI would suggest that when thinking about innovation and alternative sources of school leaders, it is important to also look at First Nations community leaders working alongside school principals with equitable decision making power. We have seen a number of successful examples of co-principal models and community elders mentoring principals.

Likewise, we agree with taking local approaches and centring the school as subject matter experts (p.168) and would suggest taking this further to recognise the whole school community as experts. When moving into the areas of bringing Indigenous Knowledges into the curriculum, it is important for school leaders to let go of the idea that they are the expert and listen to the expertise of the community.

Section 7 - National Measurement Framework

In Section 7, a Key point (p.183) is that the MFSA's Key Performance Measure has significant reporting gaps, particularly for students from priority equity cohorts.

We agree that there are options to further review how this achieved. Firstly, it is important to recognise the fact that how community sees success might include factors beyond literacy and numeracy (as described on p.95). Secondly, as well as reporting on whether equity groups have met a particular benchmark, it is important to also look at why they may or may not have met this benchmark. This report has indicated that *being in a priority equity cohort does not, of itself, equate to disadvantage. Rather, it is the experiences of these students, both within and outside the education system that affects their educational achievement (p.94).* It is important, therefore, for measures to look at the impact of schools on equity groups. For instance, a measure could include reporting on gaps in teacher's cultural competency. In a practical sense, this could be conducted through the use of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers where they are required to self-reflect on their competence and confidence to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across curriculum.

In 2021 AITSL released a discussion paper on First Nations cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce.[12] They describe the work as seeking *to bring the profession and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities together to re-imagine what our shared future might look like. Addressing our internal biases and assumptions and developing a greater understanding of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges is critical to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It can improve learning outcomes, strengthen engagement, and recognises that a relationship between students and teachers built on cultural respect and understanding can change lives.* (p.5).

In line with the aspirations expressed by AITSL and the reality of teacher impact on student engagement and learning the measurement framework should include reporting on how governments and jurisdictions are supporting the need for First Nations specific professional development of the entire education workforce.

Information request 7.2 *Proposed sub-outcomes under the future agreement*

In line with recommendation 16 of the 2020 *Looking to the Future[13]* report a new sub-outcome that recognises that Australia's First Nations students often have opportunities to further develop their own cultural competencies alongside their academic competencies needs to be crafted in consultation with all stakeholders. Additionally, many First Nations students have opportunities for engagement with First Nations communities, community organisations and community events.

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[12] AITSL. 2020. Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce Discussion paper. https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/comms/cultural-competency/aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_discussion-paper_2020.pdf

[13] 2020*. Looking to the Future: Report of the Review of Senior secondary Pathways into work, Further Education and Training.* Department of Education, Skills and Employment
 https://www.education.gov.au/quality-schools-package/resources/looking-future-report-review-senior-secondary-pathways-work-further-education-and-training

Students are then afforded with further learning to compliment the academic education they are likely to receive during their formal schooling.

General observations

- On page 8 the report mentions *Aboriginal knowledge.* This is exclusionary of the knowledge and perspectives of Torres Strait Islander people and should not be used in the context of a national document.
- The digital divide needs to be addressed to give schools the capacity to adapt to changing contexts and needs (p.22).