

## Passionate about the power of learning



LYNDON MECHELSEN

Head of indigenous education Yvonne O'Neil with boarders Trae O'Neill, left, and Adrian Brown at St Joseph's Nudgee College in Brisbane



**AUSTRALIAN  
INDIGENOUS  
EDUCATION  
FOUNDATION**

**Yvonne O'Neil is on a mission to make learning matter**

**JUSTINE FERRARI**  
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YVONNE O'Neil knows first-hand the power of education to change a life.

In the small indigenous community of Goodooga near Lightning Ridge in northern NSW where she grew up, the local school catered for students only to Year 10, so Ms O'Neil's mother sent her to school in Sydney.

That decision changed her life. Now, as the indigenous support officer at Brisbane Catholic boys' school St Joseph's Nudgee Col-

lege, it's a story she shares with the students who have left their families and homes for the first time.

"I've come from a small community, I was sent away to school, I experienced first-hand what these kids are going through," Ms O'Neil said.

She runs an indigenous education program at Nudgee College, which started as an equity program more than 20 years ago to educate children from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as wards of the state and others with no family support, as well as indigenous children.

"I've always wanted to work with other indigenous kids to show them there's a better way of life and there are opportunities out there," she said.

"Kids don't realise they have a choice. It's not their parents' choice, it's actually their choice."

"My mum gave me a choice. I didn't want it but I stuck to it. I didn't want to disappoint her. She always did what was best for us and I knew this was one way I

could repay her. And without going to school in Sydney I never would have done half the things I've done in my life."

Giving students the help and support they need to stay at school, as well as providing opportunities they would otherwise not have, is a key factor in the success of the program at Nudgee, where 84 per cent of indigenous students complete school compared with 47 per cent nationally.

From three indigenous students in 1995, Nudgee College had 14 by the time Ms O'Neil joined the school about five years ago and numbers have continued to grow, jumping markedly in 2010 when the school started working with the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation.

The AIEF provides scholarships for indigenous children to attend private boarding schools, as well as supporting them with mentors and tutors, and helping them move into further study, training or a job after school.

This year, Nudgee has 71 in-

digenous students enrolled, of whom half are supported by the AIEF. Ms O'Neill said with the AIEF's support for up to 70 students in addition to those supported by the school, she expects to enrol more than 100 indigenous students in the next two years.

Ms O'Neill said the AIEF's support had eased much of the pressure on her and her small team in giving students opportunities.

Ms O'Neill interviews students as part of the enrolment process, and each student has an individualised plan. She can even hand-pick the teachers for each student.

"I look for kids who want to make a difference to their life, who want to change the course of their life," she said.

"I don't really look at their academic results because given the right environment these kids can change that. I also look at the support they have at home: do they have someone to support them to stay in school and who knows how important education is? For some kids there is no support at home

but the student is very driven so I take them.

"I also see my job and our responsibility as a school not only to educate them in the white man's world but also to educate them about who they traditionally are to help them find that connection."

AIEF chief executive Andrew Penfold said there were 180 boarding schools in Australia but the AIEF's funding limited it to working with only 27.

"We daily get telephone calls from grandmothers and mothers begging to get their children into good schools. We're not creating this demand, we're responding to it," he said. "That's why it's essential for AIEF to grow our funding base and allow Yvonne and more schools like Nudgee to satisfy the waiting list of indigenous students wanting to get a chance at a good education."

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