

From start to finish: why Katie's now a pioneer for indigenous students



Year 12 students Katie Prince, left, and Grace Lindsay at St Catherine's School, Waverley, in Sydney's eastern suburbs

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KATIE Prince is one of a growing group: an indigenous student in Year 12 and about to finish school.

The proportion of indigenous students finishing school passed 50 per cent for the first time last year, with the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, released yesterday, showing that 51.1 per cent of indigenous students who started high school in 2007 finished Year 12 last year.

The result is a rise of 2.4 per cent at a time when the number of indigenous students in school has increased, by 4.3 percentage points last year. There has been a 13-percentage-point increase in Year 12 retention rates in the past decade.

The highest retention rates are in South Australia and Queensland, where about 70 per cent and 62 per cent of indigenous students finish Year 12, respectively.

More than half the indigenous students in Victoria and the ACT also finish Year 12, with retention rates in NSW and Tasmania more

than 45 per cent, Western Australia about 40 per cent and the Northern Territory 32 per cent.

Katie, who turns 17 next month, will be the first in her family to finish Year 12 but is confident her two younger brothers and two younger sisters will follow in her footsteps.

After growing up in Mungindi, on the NSW-Queensland border, she went to board at St Catherine's, an independent girls' school in Waverley in Sydney's eastern suburbs, with the help of a scholarship from the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation.

Even though her parents did not finish high school, Katie said they had always emphasised the importance of education.

While the retention rates for indigenous students were still well below the national rate for all students — about 80 per cent — at least it was improving.

For many indigenous students, finishing school means leaving home, which Katie said was often difficult.

"Indigenous people are very family-orientated and it's very hard to suddenly change and be in a new environment.

"It's very difficult to bear," said Katie, who has an uncle and cousins in nearby Maroubra.

"But since coming to St Catherine's, I've realised that there are so many more opportunities and things I can do.

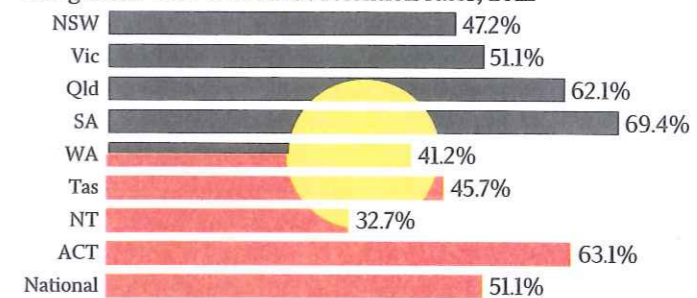
"I didn't know what was out there in the world. I think if everyone had the opportunity to experience what I have, they would realise there's so much out there."

AIEF chief executive Andrew Penfold said Year 12 completion rates for students supported by the foundation were at 88 per cent,

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CLOSING THE GAP

Indigenous Year 12 student retention rates, 2012



Source: ABS

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the highest rate of any program in the nation, but the foundation was struggling to meet the demand for scholarships from families and schools.

"Finishing Year 12 for indigenous students is the key to ensuring they have a bright future for themselves," he said.

"With a \$50m investment from government, we could set a new goal to educate 7000 indigenous kids in joint ventures with leading corporates and philanthropy. That's 7000 eager kids like Katie who desperately want the same opportunity for a great education as she has had. But we can't do this alone."

School Education Minister Peter Garrett welcomed the

steady improvement in indigenous retention rates, which has progressively risen over the past three years.

"We are determined to close the gap between the education results of indigenous and non-indigenous students and are investing in programs that we know lift results," he said.

Mr Garrett said the government had invested \$128.6m on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan with states, territories and non-government schools, which, including measures to lift attendance, literacy and numeracy skills, strengthens the education workforce and provides extra resources to schools that are in most need of help.