

Our solution's not the only answer, but it absolutely works

18 INQUIRER

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN, MAY 11-12, 2013
www.theaustralian.com.au

Empowering kids through education may give us our first Aboriginal prime minister

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IN dealing with any social challenge, the greatest mistake humanity can make is to do nothing because we can't do everything.

At the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, we don't claim to have all the answers for reducing indigenous education inequality, but we do claim to have one that is proven to work and is helping to close the gap.

Four years ago, the Australian government invested \$20 million in AIEF and challenged us to match that with \$20m from the private sector within 20 years, to create a \$40m scholarship fund to help educate up to 2000 indigenous children at some of the leading schools in the country. AIEF raised that money in 2½ years and has built a program where 90 per cent of indigenous students on our scholarships complete Year 12. The national rate of Year 12 completion for indigenous students is just over 50 per cent, compared to more than 80 per cent for non-indigenous students; addressing this inequality is one of the central pillars of the national agenda to close the gap.

Federal Education Department statistics show that AIEF has the highest Year 12 completion rate of any program in Australia, and that nearly all of the students completing Year 12 on our scholarships have made a successful transition to university or employment.

AIEF recently discovered through a Newspoll survey that two-thirds of Australians believe we will not see an indigenous prime minister in our lifetime. This view isn't based on prejudice but on the perception that, despite decades of trying and billions of dollars being spent every year, nothing works and nobody has an answer.

If good intentions are coupled with a focus on inputs and process instead of hard outcomes, all we do is perpetuate the problem.

AIEF wants to not only empower indigenous children to build a brighter future for themselves and the nation, but also to challenge that perception that nothing works. Our portrait of a future-gazing indigenous prime minister is our vision of this brighter future and a representation of our belief that indigenous children can aspire to the highest office in the land if they have access to world-class educational opportunities.

But we aren't going to achieve this by putting up balloons and raising \$400 from a bake sale. We now want to educate 7000 indigenous children at world-class schools and watch them transform our nation. That means we need to raise an extra \$100m over our original \$40m target. This is a serious and audacious goal.

AIEF's work is based on a

passionate belief that good intentions are often the enemy of desired outcomes; hence our philosophy of "hard heads, soft hearts and capable hands". This approach is what helped AIEF become a proven and scalable solution to indigenous inequality, and an important part of the national indigenous education framework.

I haven't spent my career in charity; I spent my career in law, banking and business, and this is the attitude I have brought: an unrelenting and hard-headed focus on outcomes and results.

AIEF does not believe that boarding schools are for everyone or that anyone should or should not go to, or needs to go to, a boarding school. We aren't saying this is the answer to the whole issue of indigenous education inequality. We are simply saying that we do have one solution that absolutely works. We would like to allow 7000 indigenous children to benefit from this opportunity if they and their families want this type of educational opportunity.



In an ideal world, AIEF wouldn't be needed. We look forward to the day that indigenous students in urban, regional and remote Australia have access to world-class education on their doorstep; when those who seek it line up enthusiastically to enrol at those local schools and engage in language development, culture development and community connections while staying at home with their families, if that's their choice.

We welcome and support evidence-based and outcome-focused initiatives. This won't be achieved with grandiose statements, lofty rhetoric, motherhood statements or a free ice cream on a Friday afternoon. It will take reforming and bold leadership from those courageous enough to refuse to accept failure, to challenge the status quo and implement reforms with transparency, accountability, good governance, robust strategies, measurable outcomes, targets and time frames.

In the meantime, we have indigenous families in droves seeking opportunities for their children to have a world-class education right now — not in one, five, 10 or 20 years — and we aren't willing to say no to them. Seven thousand indigenous children completing Year 12 and embarking on successful careers will transform our nation. That's the vision we're focused on, and one of those 7000 might become our first indigenous prime minister.

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