

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION PROGRAM TO BUILD LASTING CAREERS

Properly equipped schools will put thousands of students on the road to a positive future

ANDREW PENFOLD



Among indigenous leaders, ideas covering every imaginable political, ideological, practical and symbolic policy position are hotly contested. But there is one thing they all agree on: education is the answer.

Despite this consensus, progress has been agonisingly slow for decades, and the Year 12 attainment gap remains staggering at 25 per cent.

Ensuring their children get a

good education is a top priority for indigenous leaders from urban, regional and remote communities — from Redfern to the Western Desert.

Noel Pearson wrote recently that education is its own economic development strategy: “Empowered by education, our children can pursue their own opportunities in the world. By being educated, they will themselves find answers to economic development. Even if we cannot conceive of all potentialities in these communities today, the children will find their own answers as individuals and as communities.”

The evidence supports this.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that

there is almost no employment gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians with a high level of education. Andrew Forrest also pointed this out in his Creating Parity report.

There are many approaches to improving outcomes in indigenous education. At the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, we don’t pretend to have all the answers. But we have one. And with a success rate of 92 per cent for indigenous students on AIEF scholarships — the highest rate of retention and Year 12 completion of any program in the country — we know it works.

It works because the schools we work with are achieving unprecedented outcomes.

In 2013, with support from HSBC Bank, we started researching the factors behind these outcomes, with the aim of sharing them with educators across Australia and supporting better educational and career outcomes for thousands of indigenous students.

The AIEF Compendium of best practice for achieving successful outcomes with indigenous students in Australian boarding schools, which will be launched by Tony Abbott on Wednesday, draws on interviews, surveys and discussions with more than 160 educators at more than 50 schools to identify the critical factors influencing successful outcomes for Year 12 completion and career transitions.

The result is a practical guide intended to assist schools to establish a successful indigenous education program and to provide advice from leading practitioners that can assist schools with established programs to finetune their strategies and lift their student outcomes.

By equipping schools with the expertise of educators with a track record of success in indigenous education, the AIEF Compendium can help these schools achieve outcomes in years that otherwise can take decades.

As best practice in this field is constantly evolving, AIEF has also established an online community, the AIEF Compendium Online, where educators can develop and share best practice with one another in real time.

Just as AIEF scholarships enable individual schools to scale their programs, the AIEF compendium can help scale opportunities and success rates in schools across Australia to the benefit of thousands more indigenous students.

Academic Marcia Langton, one of the expert contributors to the AIEF Compendium, says: “Education is the most powerful tool for overcoming marginalisation and poverty. This compendium is an essential and powerful tool for all of us engaged in reaching parity in indigenous education outcomes.”

We know Year 12 completion is the essential first step to a level of education that has been shown to close the employment gap (and

reduce the gap in other areas such as health and housing).

Ensuring indigenous Australians complete Year 12 and progress to further study and employment at the same rate as other Australians is a priority for many Australians, and the top priority of AIEF.

AIEF offers more than 500 scholarships each year at leading schools and universities. With a proven track record, we want to raise enough money to support 7000 indigenous students to complete Year 12 and successfully transition to a sustainable career.

With the publication of the AIEF Compendium, we look forward to seeing the capacity of leading schools in Australia grow to achieve these outcomes for many thousands more.

Andrew Penfold is the founder of Australian Indigenous Education Foundation and a member of the Prime Minister’s Indigenous Advisory Council.